

A Project-based View of Entrepreneurship: Towards Action-orientation, Seriality and Collectivity

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Abstract

Traditional entrepreneurship research often tends to view entrepreneurship in terms of individual actors starting enterprises, an approach which might limit further development of entrepreneurship theory. The project-based view of entrepreneurship proposed here instead focuses on the organising of entrepreneurial acts (action-orientation). Such entrepreneurial acts can be, but are not limited to, enterprise start-ups – entrepreneurship also happens in many other forms. Moreover, those acts are temporary by nature, which means that they can be analysed in terms of projects. Saying that entrepreneurial acts are temporary projects means that people can perform several entrepreneurial acts during a lifetime – in different ways and with different results (seriality). Entrepreneurial acts are also viewed as collective ones, organised by several actors in actor networks temporarily coupled together by a somewhat common mission (collectivity). From this reasoning, it also follows that empirical investigation of project-based entrepreneurship should be made with a narrative approach, understanding the entrepreneurial act as a part of the various actors' construction of identity. With respect to every actor's - socially constructed - view of reality we therefore can understand the social construction of the entrepreneurial act. By stressing a project-based view with a social constructionist perspective we hope to encourage pluralism and diversity in theory, practice and methodology.

1. Why a project-based view of entrepreneurship?

Entrepreneurship, as we know it, materialises in an entrepreneurial act. It is the act in itself – an act characterised by a creative and influential step outside existing practices – that makes the acting individual an entrepreneur (Schumpeter, 1949). In other words, acts are ‘entrepreneurial’ because of their novelties in relation to a social context, not because they are performed by individuals sharing certain psychological traits (Shapiro & Sokol, 1982, Gartner, 1989). This also means that the entrepreneurial act cannot be fully explained by reference to the individual agent, since different social contexts constitute entirely different environments for entrepreneurship (see e.g. Trulsson, 1997).

From this characterisation it follows that entrepreneurial acts pervade societies, economies, organisations and individual lives. Innovative policies are created, new firms are started, organisations created and re-organised and individuals change the direction of their careers and private lives. Behind all such entrepreneurial acts there are also entrepreneurs: creative politicians, innovative businesspeople, enduring managers and courageous citizens. They may not spend their entire lives, not even substantial parts of it, performing entrepreneurial acts, but they all have something to say that enhance our understanding of entrepreneurship. The tendency of entrepreneurship research to focus empirical inquiry on enterprise start-ups (often in traditional male industries) means that a lot of entrepreneurial acts are never considered as a basis of knowledge on entrepreneurship, thereby depriving even the understanding of start-ups of important input. There is also a tendency in research to regard companies/organisations as stable entities going through certain developmental steps even if we study radical change (Chia & King, 1998). In contrast to this we will stress the necessity of viewing entrepreneurial acts as socially constructed events where change unfolds as individuals interact.

Moreover, entrepreneurial acts are temporary by nature. While individuals persist (at least for a while), acts usually starts, goes on and diffuses into their environment. Entrepreneurial acts are not different in this sense; they are temporary sequences of action (Marris & Somerset, 1971), processes in which novelties are created (Bygrave, 1993, Steyaert, 1997), not always discernible from their context (Chia & King, 1998). The entrepreneurial act of convincing a legislative body to accept a controversial legislation is a temporary effort, and so are usually most re-organisations in corporations and most change processes in individual lives. Even firm start-ups are temporary in the sense that the explorative process fades out after a while, giving place to repetitive standardisation where the new ideas are exploited in everyday operations (March, 1995). In this sense, entrepreneurial acts are similar to projects (Waddock & Post, 1991, Bouchiki, 1993); i.e. unique, complex undertakings subject to limitations in terms of resources, time and quality (Packendorff, 1995).

Saying that entrepreneurial acts are temporary projects (Lundin, 2000) also means that people can perform several entrepreneurial acts during a lifetime (Dyer, 1994). In contrast to defining individual entrepreneurs from single firms that they have started, one should thus define entrepreneurial individuals from the series of entrepreneurial acts that they have performed. It is not unusual that entrepreneurs start several businesses during their lives (Macmillan, 1986, Scott & Rosa, 1996, Wright et al, 1997a, Alsos & Kolvereid, 1998), but it is unusual that they are acknowledged for other entrepreneurial acts that might be as well as innovative and creative as the start-ups. And there are of course numerous entrepreneurial individuals that are rarely acknowledged because they devote their creative energies to community work, innovation in the public sector, non-profit operations, project-based work, cultural happenings

or just adopt a different and/or controversial lifestyle (Waddock & Post, 1991, Kupferberg, 1998). For these individuals, entrepreneurship is experiences from a series of temporary entrepreneurial acts performed in social interaction with other individuals.

From this it also follows that the notion of defining entrepreneurship with reference to single individuals must be questioned. Even though new firms are formally governed by a visible single CEO or chairperson, it does not mean that firms are created by these visible single individuals only. New firms are often created by teams or networks of individuals, where different persons are involved in the process (Birley, 1985). When the visible entrepreneur ends up in new entrepreneurial ventures, it is not unusual to find the same individuals around her/him again (a pattern found not only in business life but also in cultural life, regional development etc.), but they also change people to interact with to build new constellations. This pattern of interactive entrepreneurship is even more noticeable in the 'other' forms of entrepreneurial acts mentioned above – in some cases it might even be totally impossible for single individuals to get something done on their own. Consequently, entrepreneurship is in practice often a collective process, and entrepreneurial acts are thus often collective acts. It is even not unusual that firms as entities are ascribed entrepreneurial actions (Zahra et al, 1999). Entrepreneurial acts should thus be seen as constructed by a number of "co-actors" in social networks rather than by single persons.

For entrepreneurship research, this discussion means that a developed understanding of entrepreneurial action should be based on inquiry on series of entrepreneurial acts rather than on single specific acts (i.e. enterprise start-ups). The co-actors live with the different acts as episodes of social interaction, and incorporate their subjective perceptions of these episodes and contexts into life stories and thus into their identities (Kupferberg, 1998). The co-actor's life path is a discontinuous one, where each discontinuity – be they entrepreneurial acts or something else – becomes an occasion for reflection (both subjective and inter-subjective) and thus for construction and re-construction of identities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, Gergen, 1985, Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001). We therefore understand entrepreneurial identities as subjective construction in social interaction. Entrepreneurial acts and entrepreneurial identities seem to exist on different levels, however; when individuals talk about entrepreneurial acts they talk about collective action but when they express identification as entrepreneurs they talk about single individuals. For us as researchers it is thus both interesting to study each entrepreneurial act in itself and series of entrepreneurial acts occurring over time in order to gain understanding of how individuals perceive their entrepreneurial co-actorship.

Given this characterisation of entrepreneurship, it is evident that the current theoretical understandings of entrepreneurial acts and the individuals who perform them are in need for further theoretical development. The line of development implied by the above reasoning means moving entrepreneurship theory through three steps of argumentation; (1) from a concern for individual traits and socio-economic contexts in new firm creation to entrepreneurial acts in a wide sense, (2) from studying single acts to studying series of acts in the life courses of individuals, and (3) from viewing entrepreneurial acts as performed by lone individuals to view them as collective constructions by co-actors in networks. As indicated above, many of these arguments can already be found in recent literature on entrepreneurship, but as we see it, they need to be connected into some sort of framework. To us, the recent developments in the field of project management (cf Packendorff, 1995, Ekstedt et al, 1999, Söderlund, 2000) can be a source of inspiration with its focus on projects as events, multi-project settings and teamwork/network organising. The aim of the paper is thus to apply a

project metaphor to entrepreneurial acts, and to identify theoretical and practical consequences of such a reorientation of entrepreneurship research. The project-based view of entrepreneurship can be summarised in the following line of argumentation:

- Entrepreneurship can be studied in terms of people performing entrepreneurial acts, of which enterprise start-up is only one form.
- Entrepreneurial acts occur in series over the life paths of individuals, where each act is a discontinuity with implications for identity construction
- Entrepreneurial acts are temporary collective experiences (“projects”) in different contexts – i.e. transitory densities in actor networks.

In the rest of the paper, these argumentative steps of the project-based view will be discussed more in detail, highlighting implications for theory development and empirical research. Each section will end with some examples from recent empirical studies on innovative and creative people in e.g. musical theatres, business advising, and organisational consulting who have performed several entrepreneurial acts during their lives. The individuals chosen for these examples work in different sectors and do different things, but they are alike in that they view themselves as entrepreneurial and perform entrepreneurial acts together with others. In their life stories, they all combine “visible entrepreneurship”, i.e. start-up of firms, with occasions of intrapreneurship in organisations and other entrepreneurial acts not involving (or resulting in) formal organisations. We have called these three people Stephen, Sheila and Anne.

Stephen, now in his forties, started his career as a teenage actor in a movie based on a book by a famous Swedish author. After pursuing the acting career for some years, he shifted direction towards directing and writing plays. Doing this, he discovered that his upbringing in a family business led him to also become interested in successfully introducing the plays into the market. And if he took care of that himself, he would not be subject to annoying opinions and decisions of publishers and theatre directors. He, his sister and a few other colleagues jointly started a small production company, and by using their old connection with the famous author they could start to produce successful plays, musicals and even corporate events based on the author’s books. Stephen also teamed up with the author and some investors in creating a small amusement park, which has become a major tourist attraction in the area. While the production company is quite small and based on temporary employment contracts, the amusement park project involved about 100 persons during several years. Stephen views himself as an entrepreneur and an organiser of loosely coupled networks, who often takes administrative responsibility in order to give full freedom to the creative artists whom he works with. His previous experience as director is that successful creative processes are often a result of a number of skilled people given the undisturbed opportunity to exercise their individual expertise. In the cultural sector, it is unusual with commercial managers who also master the creative parts, he says.

Sheila, also in her forties, lives close to the sea in a small rural community with her husband who has a small firm building hand-made yachts. After graduating from university with a major in liberal arts she moved anywhere she could get a temporary job, which was not always so easy. When she met her husband, they settled down close to her husband’s shipyard and had two children. Together they started a small company in which they manufactured and marketed lotions and cosmetics from natural herbs, but when the children started school she wanted to do something else. She came in contact with a nearby museum, which she made a part of a nationwide cultural project, and she also created a local project on developing elderly care. Successfully financed, these projects provided her with salaries for some years, but she

also did some voluntary work marketing a local music festival. After that, she heard about a nationwide program for female entrepreneurship development, and she managed to make the community part of that program. The program was to be implemented by local project managers, a job that was hers from the start. During a couple of years she worked intensively together with a network of dedicated women with advising on business start-ups, but despite good results they failed in convincing the local politicians to prolong the program. Instead she took a one-year class in project management together with some collaborators in the region and she established a consulting firm specialising in funding and management of regional development projects. Not all projects are creative, she says, but she has always been able to find work where new and different solutions have been needed.

Ann was brought up in the 1950's in a sports-oriented family that at the time was considered to be unconventional. Among other things, a competitive instinct was nurtured, as was a will to always come back. On completing her high school exams, she worked as a salesperson and also spent some years abroad. She ran out of money and returned to Sweden, where she formed a family and entered a career as purchaser in the fashion industry. After a conflict with a manager, Ann borrowed money from her mother and started her own fashion store. The business developed in terms of turnover, but liquidity began to fall to low levels at the same time as her husband betrayed her. In order to afford a divorce, she again entered the fashion industry. After three years, however, she had a serious legal conflict with her employer, which she won at the price of acquiring psoriasis. Through her professional network, she was offered to become the founding project manager of a new trade fair concept, and after five years she and her team had established the fair as a well-known annual event on the national scene. She also started her own information consulting company, which led to a post as public relations manager of a major corporation. At the onset of recession, however, Ann lost her job and brought her consulting firm back to life. One of her contacts invited her into a partnership network of small independent consulting firms, an offer that she gladly accepted.

2. Entrepreneurial acts – not only start-up of firms

In order to discuss what entrepreneurial acts are all about – or can become all about – one must go back to the origins of entrepreneurship research, more specifically to Joseph Schumpeter (see Trullsson, 1997, for a discussion). In his analysis on economic development, Schumpeter (1947) assumed that economies developed as actors in the economy responded to changes and events in their environment. These responses could either be 'adaptive' or 'creative.' Responding in an 'adaptive' fashion meant that the actor changed some aspects of his operations while all basic practices remained as they were, i.e. a response that built on existing practices and ensured their continuity. 'Creative' responses, on the other hand, meant that the actor came up with an entirely new way of operating and changed all existing practices in a way that implied long-term effects. The creative response thus implied a radical break with all taken-for-granted assumptions, a break that *ex post* could be identified as an important step for the development.

In addition to characterising entrepreneurship by reference to the creative response, Schumpeter also specified what kind of role the entrepreneurial agent actually played. The entrepreneur could provide financial resources for his own ventures, but it was not necessary in order to be considered as 'entrepreneurial.' Likewise, the entrepreneur was the one who brought an idea into a commercially viable product, but it was not necessary for him to come up with the idea himself. All in all, the actor that produced creative responses that lasted for

long and brought them successfully into the market, was considered to fulfil an 'entrepreneurial function' in the economy.

From this characterisation, it follows that entrepreneurial acts happen in all sectors of society. With his background in economics, it was natural that Schumpeter analysed entrepreneurship in terms of markets, sales and economic returns, but it is also natural to analyse entrepreneurship in other fields of society than business life on their own premises. Moreover, in most fields of society, entrepreneurship has economic consequences even though it does not operate in a context of a free market economy. Entrepreneurial acts may happen within existing organisations, in authorities, in universities, in voluntary associations, in sub-groups of society. They might even happen in the private life of individuals.

It should thus be quite clear that enterprise start-ups – or organisation start-ups (Gartner, 1989) – is just one form of 'creative responses'. Many novelties that enter the market are developed within existing organisations in the form of projects, often (but not always) sharing all essential characteristics of entrepreneurial acts (Kanter, 1992, Zahra et al, 1999, Kidder 2000). When the entrepreneurial act is over, i.e. when the novelty or innovation has reached its market, the project is over and its result transferred to the permanent organisation for further exploitation (Ekstedt et al, 1999). And in some cases, non-entrepreneurial projects are used as 'windows of opportunity' for radical individuals in the organisation to bring about some 'real change'. While the result of the project lives on, the project itself ends and the team is scattered. In fact, this happens frequently also where newly created firms are concerned (March, 1995, Wright et al, 1997b). In a sense, this can be seen as a consequence of long-term development towards a 'temporarisation' of society:

“Many observers have noted the contemporary decay in production of thoroughgoing literary Utopias (in sharp contrast with the ferment of the 18th and 19th centuries), and their replacement by satirical or polemical versions of life in the mass society of the future (e.g., Orwell's *1984*); what has gone unremarked is the enormous proliferation of short-term quasi-Utopias of all sorts – conferences, meetings, “task forces,” research projects, experiments, training exercises. It is as if we have traded the grand visions of social life as it might be lived for miniature societies, to which one can become committed intensively, meaningfully, satisfyingly – and impermanently.” (Miles, 1964: p. 465)

Looking for entrepreneurial projects rather than entrepreneurial enterprise start-ups means opening up the empirical basis for entrepreneurship theory significantly. Moreover, it is not only acts formally called 'projects' that is of interest; entrepreneurial acts in the form of temporary sequences of action occur everywhere.

Besides widening the empirical basis of research on entrepreneurship by acknowledging more acts as entrepreneurial acts, this also means that more individuals are acknowledged as entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurship is essentially a masculine construction (Goffee & Scase, 1985), due to the tendency of describing entrepreneurs as daring conquerors and entrepreneurship as starting up new firms. Not surprisingly, women and ethnic minorities are usually seen as marginal phenomena in the world of entrepreneurship. To be defined as an entrepreneur, the individual should possess certain (masculine) characteristics and/or start a new firm (which, as we have seen, is not the only possible way for entrepreneurial acts to materialise). To put it in a rude manner: if you look for white men doing things that white men usually do, you will find white men doing things that they usually do (so called

hegemonic masculinities, in the terms of Collinson & Hearn, 1996). You will not find women, men and ethnic minorities involved in other forms of entrepreneurial acts, people who also bring inventions into different sorts of 'markets' but who do not register firms in order to do it. The current understanding of entrepreneurship is a construction by a scattered elite of politicians, academics and active businessmen who rarely find any reason to re-construct the taken-for-granted view of what entrepreneurship is all about.

Among our interviewees, there are several examples of both traditional entrepreneurial acts (i.e. business start-ups) and of other, project based ones. Besides starting up firms, Stephen has several times been in the position to combine new manuscripts, new people and scarce resources into something that will be perceived as new and interesting by the audience. Ann's entrepreneurship is mostly exercised in professional project networks, but her own visions are most clear when she is working by herself. Sheila's professional life is an ever-changing life style in which community work, professional networks, projects and firms are woven together into a whole characterised by diverging manifestations of entrepreneurship. Stephen explains what entrepreneurship is to him:

"Well, our ventures imply everything that happens from the initial idea – may it be a flash of genius or something else – until it is accomplished. They are always something that other people can take part of, or something that exists because someone should take part of them. There is a kind of dynamic development path, where it goes up a bit, down a bit, and then up and up until we reach a peak. There and then, curtains are withdrawn, the new product is launched, the new play is presented... whatever it may be. Project-oriented people are usually very impatient, but on the other hand very persistent. Impatience keeps the pace of the process high and becomes the driving force of development. And persistence is that you want it to become real and done – damn it! Otherwise it is a personal failure for them. In many ways, this is entrepreneurship. And again, it has nothing to do with making money, because you can make money in numerous ways. But of course the project is more successful if it generates a net profit, compared to if someone puts some iron bars in a park and calls it art. That is also a creative project, but unfortunately not very profitable in an economic sense." (Stephen)

It also seems that they all view their entrepreneurial acts in terms of temporary action sequences. When the entrepreneurial act is over – i.e. when the project is completed, when the play has reached the audience, when the common sake of the network is obsolete or when the firm is established – life goes on towards something. New entrepreneurial acts might follow, but there might also be years of repetitive work – i.e. playing the play twice a week, having regular network meetings or managing the established firm. We do not intend that the individuals described here are extremely entrepreneurial, but they have still enacted entrepreneurship several times in different forms. We also do not intend that all projects or all other extraordinary efforts should be regarded as entrepreneurial – that depends on the idea, how it is implemented and how the process is related to the context. Among projects, most construction projects are usually regarded as routine work requiring a low degree of creativity and newness, while many cultural projects are subject to institutionalised expectations to be different and provocative.

3. Entrepreneurial life courses – series of entrepreneurial acts

Viewing entrepreneurial acts in terms of projects also means that the relation between the actors (co-entrepreneurs) and the result of their act can be temporary by nature. Entrepreneurs are traditionally expected to live with the results of their entrepreneurial acts (i.e. their firms) for a long time, either as passive owners or active managers (Lundin, 2000). When acknowledging also other entrepreneurial acts than enterprise start-ups, it is clear that the long-term relationship between the entrepreneurs and the act is far from a necessity. And even if such a long-term relationship exists, it does not exclude the entrepreneur from performing new entrepreneurial acts.

The notion of ‘habitual’ and ‘serial’ entrepreneurs has been subject to several studies on repeated business start-ups in the life course of the same individual. In line with the request from Macmillan (1986) to study individuals who repeatedly founded their own businesses, a typology of habitual entrepreneurs has been developed in which entrepreneurial acts can be performed both within existing firms and in new ventures, both implying ownership and employeeship (Donckels & Dupont, 1985, Wright et al, 1997a). Empirically, this has meant inquiry on e.g. venture capitalists (Wright et al, 1997b), business clusters (Rosa, 1998), and entrepreneurship experience (Starr & Bygrave, 1992). What we find interesting in this line of research is (1) that the single-firm perspective is rejected (Scott & Rosa, 1996), (2) that serial entrepreneurship within existing organisations is acknowledged (Wright et al, 1997b), and (3) that the social network surrounding the entrepreneur is seen as an important resource in the recurrent entrepreneurial acts (Scott & Rosa, 1996). Still, most of this research is concerned with firm start-ups, management buy-outs and the creation of business portfolios (Scott & Rosa, 1996), but the image is clear; habitual entrepreneurs work by projects – in sequence, in parallel, or in both.

The idea that some entrepreneurs perform repeated entrepreneurial acts has also caused some scholars to discuss the notion of ‘entrepreneurial careers’ (Dyer, 1994, Kupferberg, 1998). The point of studying serial entrepreneurship in terms of careers is that issues on socialisation (i.e. how the individual develops hers/his life path through social interaction), different entrepreneurial roles and different life stages are brought into the discussion. From this research, it appears that individual entrepreneurs perceive their entrepreneurship in entirely different ways (Derr, 1984) and that the way private life is handled also affects the entrepreneurial career significantly, not least for women (Goffee & Scase, 1985). The typical entrepreneurial career envisaged by Dyer (1994) starts out with some years of hard work, financial strains, sacrificed private life, customer orientation and strategic questions concerning partnership, ownership etc. Behind the entrepreneurial act are often conscious choices concerning lifestyle and career reorientation (Kupferberg, 1998). If it goes well (i.e. that the firm grows), the entrepreneur becomes more of a manager; a delegating loner occupied with problems of administration and family involvement in the business. In its late stage, the entrepreneurial career is characterised by wealth and professional security, but also by reluctant retirement and business succession problems. Like most others, Dyer views living with the same firm throughout one’s life path as the natural thing, and serial entrepreneurship and/or changes in career orientation is something that happens as a consequence of business failures. However, the similarities with existing notions on project-based careers are evident.

In literature, the project-based career is described in terms of a sequence of temporary jobs, and career progression means going from being a hard-working underpaid outsider to become a well-established insider working as a mentor and strategist (Jones, 1996). In many ways, Jones (ibid.) claims, a project-based career is a kind of serial entrepreneurship where gained knowledge, reputation, social contacts and financial resources are gradually developed through a sequence of ventures. The drawback is of course that the individual becomes a “loner”, a constantly moving person without stable emotional relationships in the workplace (Garsten, 1999, Söderlund, 2000). The project-based career is not, however, a phenomenon existing among free-lancing, self-employed individuals only, it can also be found in the guise of formal employment in organisations (Arthur et al, 1999, Cadin et al, 2000). As an employee in a project-based organisation, you might work full-time just as everyone else, but your work actually consists of handling various projects, in sequence and/or in parallel. Firms can also be seen as frameworks allowing for human beings to develop themselves in a project-like manner (Freeman & Gilbert, 1988). And there is also the possibility that people perceive their work progress in terms of projects even though they have not been formally involved in any, since they may organise their retrospective career story as a sequence of important episodes and steps (Arthur et al, 1999, Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001).

Given that many entrepreneurial individuals perform repeated temporary entrepreneurial acts during their life courses, it is also natural to assume that these entrepreneurial acts are different to each other. Behind a series of new ventures there might e.g. also be other entrepreneurial acts within organisations, in non-for-profit work, or in private life. In our empirical studies, we find this combination of serial entrepreneurship and a mix of different sorts of entrepreneurial acts. Besides being a driving force behind the establishment of two firms, Stephen also engaged in finding new and sometimes controversial ways of organising cultural events. Sheila has started two firms during her career, but the most creative and far-reaching results she achieved in various regional development projects. Ann, who has oscillated between full-time employment and independent entrepreneur several times during her life, has also managed a large entrepreneurial project. None of these individuals have spent any longer periods as salaried employees, and it seems that they view their careers in terms of a series of temporary entrepreneurial acts. These acts might be projects or efforts undertaken as a part of a formal employment, but they also concern enterprise start-ups – establishing a firm is a project in itself. Sheila reflects upon why she always starts anew:

“I have always worked by projects, except for my new firm – so far at least. Somehow, I think this is a consequence of starting my professional life in the cultural sector. You don’t get much permanent jobs there, rather short assignments. So I have just slipped into different ventures from time to time. I actually enjoy working in ventures where I know that my effort is limited in time – I cannot imagine working at the same place until I am 65 years old. In a way, my career is thus a result of my personality. It is satisfying to see the results of you actions, but I am often anxious when we are approaching deadline – what am I to do afterwards? There could be a transitory period before the next project starts. I often think that I should actually enjoy a permanent position if the work content was the right one – if you don’t like it, you can always quit.” (Sheila)

From an earlier study of women who started independent schools (Lindgren, 2000), we concluded that they all viewed the start up as a project mentally separated from the subsequent repetitive daily operations. Often, all these different forms of entrepreneurial acts are used to constitute or change the individual’s lifestyle, and they occur in series during the life path of the individual. For the people interviewed here, approaching new ideas and tasks

as projects implies being entrepreneurial and creative. And being entrepreneurial and creative, that is to repeatedly engage in new ventures when there are opportunities and/or need for change in life.

4. Entrepreneurial acts as temporary collective experiences

When we look upon entrepreneurship both in theory and practice it seems that there is a widespread need to see it as embodied in the lone entrepreneur, as if entrepreneurial acts could only be performed by single individuals¹. The lone entrepreneur is represented through history from ancient myths like Odysseus to the entrepreneurs of our time such as Ingvar Kamprad, Richard Branson or Bill Gates. He – the lone entrepreneur is usually a ‘he’ – is described as a daring, bold individual who challenges his environment and is challenged by it. He sees what others do not see, he does what others would not do, and he accomplishes far-stretching changes in business and society. Basically, this is of course a result of the individualistic orientation of entrepreneurship theory and of the practical need for heroes and role models in society. What is interesting here, however, is what images of entrepreneurship that are conveyed and how this affects scientific inquiry on the subject.

The practical image of entrepreneurship is that it is embodied in human being possessing extraordinary strengths in terms of energy, fighting spirit, creativity, charisma, competitiveness and so on. It is also an individual often in conflict with parts of his context due to controversial ideas and manners. Such an image is problematic in several ways. One problem is the simplified picture of how business and society changes – the portrayed entrepreneur is in fact a most un-democratic leader, living on his ability to convince and conquer. Another problem is that the image does not suit all those that could (and should) engage in entrepreneurial activity; it is a most masculine ideal that many feel estranged to. Moreover, most entrepreneurs work repeatedly together with others in actor networks, just like ‘ordinary’ managers and other professionals do (Birley, 1985, Waddock & Post, 1991, Larson & Starr, 1993, Cornwall, 1998).

In entrepreneurship research – which of course both influences and reflects popular images of entrepreneurs – there is a widespread (but of course not unitary) tendency to identify entrepreneurs as individuals performing entrepreneurial acts. From a social constructionist perspective it is however natural to assume that entrepreneurial acts are constructed in interaction between actors. Your “own” ideas do not just fall down from the sky; they are all the result of interaction with others in different forms (formal or informal). Basically, there cannot be any entrepreneurial acts that are the product of just one individual – all entrepreneurial acts are to some extent collective acts. The entrepreneur cannot perform entrepreneurial acts without co-actors (no matter how remote they may be) and an audience (i.e. the ones that are convinced and make change real by changing their patterns of living and consuming). Of course some actors are closer to the entrepreneurial act than others and thereby also more influential (cf the notion of ‘action sets’ in Hansen, 1995), and of course different sets of actors in a network is mobilised in different entrepreneurial acts.

¹ According to Schumpeter (1949: 70), however, “the entrepreneurial function need not be embodied in a physical person and in particular a single physical person.”

The implication of this reasoning is that entrepreneurial acts are not acts by lone individuals, instead they are acts performed in temporary densities in actor networks. These densities – may they be called projects (Ekstedt et al, 1999), arenas (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), control initiatives (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998), strategic issues (Dutton, 1993), parallel organisations (Kanter, 1992) or windows of opportunity (Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994) – are created by one or several loosely coupled actors, who become tightly coupled for some time in order to transform an innovative idea into reality. This is of course evident when it comes to entrepreneurial acts performed within organisations, but it is also an accurate description of non-embedded acts such as enterprise start-ups, social movements in society etc.

Many entrepreneurial acts therefore take the form of temporary organising processes (Packendorff, 1995, Söderlund, 2000). Lundin & Söderholm (1995) suggest that such temporary organising involves four sub-processes that all goes on throughout the project but with shifting importance for understanding daily action; action-based entrepreneurship, fragmentation for commitment-building, planned isolation, and institutionalised termination. The first process is most important in the beginning, when the idea-generator(s) try to gain support for the new idea and start to construct a social network for its subsequent realisation. Thereafter, the idea is transformed into a practical ‘project’ through a process of ‘fragmentation.’ This means that the project is mentally ‘carved out’ from the everyday flow of events through including and excluding tasks, time periods and people (this is necessary for making the idea real, but it also means a risk that actors attracted by the idea find its concrete ‘operationalisation’ unattractive). After this, the project goes into a phase of ‘planned isolation’, i.e. the implementation of the identified tasks during the identified time by the identified participants. The project team here organises itself as a somewhat detached unit, working hard against deadlines and budget restrictions – with the obvious risk of becoming too detached and thus subject to inertia. When approaching the end of the organising process, it is again ‘opened up’ to the rest of the world with a hope that the results will now be found worthwhile. At this stage, the actor network de-couples itself as individuals go back to previous activities or to new actor network densities elsewhere (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998). Some of the actors might work together again in new entrepreneurial acts, while others remain at distance.

Even though all theoretical models such as the above cited share the drawback of being too simplified in order to capture all possible empirical examples, they still provides us with leads to what may be interesting to focus empirical inquiry on. The entrepreneurial act is a result of complementary individual actions in interaction, where the actions taken by the visible entrepreneur might be of limited practical significance. Stephen, Sheila and Anne are all visible entrepreneurs in some cases – i.e. Stephen’s production company, Sheila’s projects and companies, and Anne’s consulting firm. “Behind” them were in those cases less visible co-actors (family members, colleagues, professional contacts) without whom the entrepreneurial acts would hardly have succeeded. But they have also acted as non-visible entrepreneurs themselves behind other people in their professional networks – Stephen during the amusement park build-up, Sheila during the start-up of the entrepreneurship promotion programme, and Anne during the fair trade project. In almost all entrepreneurial acts, they have worked collectively, assuming responsibility for different parts of the entrepreneurial process.

“During my years as boutique owner, I participated in activities arranged by the regional Chamber of Commerce, and I got to know Martha and some other business women there. Together, we took courses and educated ourselves, and we also created language

courses for business people in the region. When I experienced problems with liquidity in my business 1983, my lawyer recommended bankruptcy, and luckily I was able to close down the firm without any remaining debts. During the years to come, I worked as purchase manager, but I kept contacts with Martha and my other friends in the Chamber of Commerce network. [...] In 1987, I finally left the company after all nasty conflicts, and I was now divorced, mum of a small child and unemployed. I called Martha, who told me about the trade fair idea she had developed together with three other women in a foundation that they had recently established. She said that she needed a responsible project leader with the competence of bringing the idea to the market, but I hesitated for a while. It was a huge challenge, based on a theme that had never been tested before in Sweden. Finally, I decided that I could do it with their support, and on we went. The first fair took place in my home town 1988, and I worked as project manager for the foundation until 1991.” (Martha)

All three individuals were aware that most of their entrepreneurial acts were the result of both individual action and social interaction, and that their individual roles had shifted from project to project, they had some difficulties separating their own actions from those of the co-actors. Neither Stephen nor Sheila could recall exactly who came up with the various creative ideas, who planned and led the entrepreneurial process, who took the major steps towards market acceptance. They still maintained that they had always made decisions out of their own minds – this was especially evident where Anne was concerned – but the outcomes of the various entrepreneurial acts were also dependent upon the choices their co-actors had made for themselves. While they saw themselves as entrepreneurs (which meant a focus on themselves as the source of action), they did not see themselves as the single force behind the various entrepreneurial acts that they had experiences of. To them, the entrepreneurship was enacted as temporary densities in their professional networks, densities that occurred from time to time but in different constellations. Neither Anne nor her colleague Martha now works with the trade fair foundation, but there is always the possibility to cooperate again if something new happens.

5. The project-based view: Consequences in practice and theory

This chapter departed from a conviction that entrepreneurship theory and research is in need for movement in several directions. The direction proposed here, the project-based view of entrepreneurship, consists of three steps of argumentation; (1) entrepreneurship should be studied in terms of temporary entrepreneurial acts, of which enterprise start-ups is only one form, (2) entrepreneurial acts occur in series over the life-paths of involved individuals, (3) entrepreneurial acts are the result of collective social interaction between individuals in a temporarily re-coupled actor network. If the project-based view thus constitutes the proposed movement and its proposed direction, it is natural to question at what destination(s) the movement is aimed. As we see it, there are several such possible – and important – destinations to consider.

Enlarging the empirical basis of entrepreneurship. The conceptual discussion about entrepreneurship, about operationalisations, empirical focus etc must be contextualised in a broader sense. By this we mean that we must encourage ourselves as researchers to be critical to what we study. Every enterprise start-up is not important as an entrepreneurial act, some are and some are not. When we study start-ups we must ask ourselves ‘what is actually new

about this?’ This also means that practical definitions of entrepreneurs and/or entrepreneurial action must be subject to critical analysis; we cannot only read business newspapers and accept what journalists regard as entrepreneurial action (if we do so we will only find traditional entrepreneurship). For instance, movie and theatre projects can be regarded as entrepreneurial collective acts. There we can find new ways of dealing with new forms of organising and how different creative ideas are used in the construction of “plots” (many independent theatres are very creative and oriented towards breaking barriers in many different dimensions). We are not saying that every theatre or movie project produce newness (how many start-ups do that?), but we would definitively discover new things about entrepreneurship if the empirical base could be broadened. The same goes for many development and research projects, start-ups of non-commercial organisations, and voluntary work.

Enlarging entrepreneurial identity. One of the most important implications of this paper is the importance of enlarging entrepreneurial identity for human beings and collectives in society. More people can refer to an entrepreneurial identity if we enlarge the practical empirical cases we use to identify entrepreneurial acts. For instance, cultural projects like theatre plays, musicals and concerts can be regarded as entrepreneurial acts because they are new ideas and/or new approaches that will be used further on. Typical female ventures like e.g. independent schools can also be regarded as entrepreneurial acts even though they do not result in a new company being created. To us it is clear that these acts are often as entrepreneurial as the empirical cases used in traditional entrepreneurial research (like e.g. start-ups of high tech firms).

Emancipated entrepreneurship. Enlarging entrepreneurial identity also has the practical consequence that individuals and collectives of individuals in society can emancipate themselves from being non-entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurship is one of the virtues of almost all modern economic systems, and through the tendency of embodying entrepreneurial acts into entrepreneurs, it is also a basis for identifying important individuals in society. In addition to these modern heroes, i.e. self-assertive “lone” men starting successful enterprises against all odds, we would like to see other creative, innovative and committed people viewing themselves – and being viewed by others – as entrepreneurs. This will also affect several new groups of people and also political bodies. If we e.g. notice theatres as entrepreneurial acting groups of people maybe they can have a better financial support from governments and companies.

Entrepreneurship: From single individual action to recurring social interaction. In this chapter we have argued that what have been regarded as individual action instead can be seen as social constructions or social interaction. The tendency in research and practice to focus a central individual instead of a collective is ideological and therefore political. In society we produce and reproduce structures in social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and therefore entrepreneurship should be viewed as a collective act. Therefore we must look upon each individual in interaction with others – friends, professional network members, project team members or family members. Every idea, innovation or creativity is a product of interaction with others more explicitly or more implicitly. The ideological and political consequences of this reasoning points towards that “the lone entrepreneurship myth” should be neglected or abandoned. This can also lead us to new empirical fields and that new groups of people can be studied. We can study female industries like independent schools and see that they do things together in theme and perform collective entrepreneurial action (Lindgren, 2000). Many times they do not know who actually came up with innovative ideas because it

was not important who came up with it. If we focus on the act instead of the person this will become evident. It might even be so that if we ask people how an idea was generated, we might come to the conclusion that anybody could have come up with it and implemented it – given the right co-actors. People do it together.

Narrative approaches: Entrepreneurial identity as constructed through stories about acts. By studying series of entrepreneurial acts we can get a better understanding of how entrepreneurial acts are constructed. We cannot understand acts if we do not understand how the actors have experienced past acts and relationships with each other and their view of future acts and future relationships (Kupferberg, 1998). Through narratives we can understand driving forces and we can also combine different parts of individuals' lives, and understand what is behind new ideas. We can also find out where the problems lies, where obstacles can be found, why good new ideas die. Since we view entrepreneurial acts as collective experiences, the empirical basis concerning an entrepreneurial act cannot be the visible entrepreneur's narrative only. If different narratives from different involved actors are brought together in the analysis, our understanding of the event will be much richer (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2001). Entrepreneurial acts are socially constructed by individuals in interaction, which means that these acts are also episodes of identity construction for all involved.

Pluralism and diversity guiding entrepreneurship research. By applying the project metaphor to entrepreneurship research, we hope to have made some small contributions in the moving of entrepreneurship. Moving entrepreneurship in the direction of other entrepreneurial acts than enterprise start-ups, other actors than individual ones and series of acts rather than single ones, should be a way towards increased understanding of all entrepreneurial activities in society (enterprise start-ups included). Our own opinion is, however, that moving entrepreneurship is not enough; entrepreneurship has also the potential to become a movement, an important bottom-up force in societal development. If we think about companies/organisations/societies as flexible, innovative and always changing, entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship will become more natural. But in order to become a movement, entrepreneurship should be constructed as something that implies innovation in all sectors of society, involves all kinds of actors and results in new conditions and patterns in the lives of individuals. As scholars in the field of entrepreneurship, it is our responsibility to contribute to such a movement – or at least to co-contribute...

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