Social constructionism and entrepreneurship

Basic assumptions and consequences for theory and research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to develop a social constructionist approach to entrepreneurship and to discuss its consequences for entrepreneurship research.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a review of current methodological debates in the entrepreneurship field concerning the need and implications of explicit references to basic scientific assumptions in research texts, a social constructionist perspective is outlined and its theoretical and methodological consequences are discussed.

Findings – A social constructionist perspective may contribute to the development of entrepreneurship research both through opening up possibilities for the inclusion of new theoretical fields, and through the demands on new methodological approaches following such theoretical inclusions.

Originality/value – Based on an identified lack of research literature discussing underlying scientific assumptions within entrepreneurship, the paper provides a thorough discussion and summary of existing and future social constructionist developments.

Keywords Entrepreneurialism, Qualitative methods, Philosophy, Epistemology, Social interaction

Paper type General review

Introduction

The aim of this article is to develop a constructionist notion of entrepreneurship and to discuss its consequences for research. Concepts, methodologies and outcomes of entrepreneurship research are linked to hidden and taken-for-granted views of reality, knowledge and ideology that exclude and include different research questions and

phenomena. Raising awareness about such basic assumptions of research, we will find insights that could benefit the development of entrepreneurship research significantly, not least in terms of reconsidering and refining methods in theorizing and empirical fieldwork.

A social constructionist perspective is explicitly based on assumptions of ontology, epistemology and ideology. It also implies that entrepreneurship is constructed in social interaction between individuals and that it is the task of research to enhance our understanding of these interactions (Steyaert, 1997; Chell and Pittaway, 1998; Chell, 2000; Fletcher, 2003; Hosking and Hjorth, 2004; Downing, 2005; Fletcher, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). It is not our intention to argue that contemporary entrepreneurship research is based on "wrong" or "false" basic assumptions on ontology, epistemology and ideology – on the contrary, a young and lively field as entrepreneurship should encourage pluralism in its development. A pluralistic stance should be equally important both for the establishment of new lines of inquiry and for the ongoing construction of cumulative knowledge. What seems to be the problem is that most entrepreneurship literature does not articulate and discuss any such assumptions, implying a tendency to take established concepts, methodologies and empirical operationalisations for granted – often (but not always) those connected to the traditions within psychology and micro-economics (Pittaway, 2005).

The article starts with a brief overview of the ongoing scientific debate within the entrepreneurship field in which we criticize the lack of awareness of basic assumptions and suggest social constructionism as a complementary paradigm. We then describe social constructionism, in general terms and as applied to the field of entrepreneurship. The consequences for entrepreneurship research outlined above are discussed in detail. The article concludes with a summary of the new venues for entrepreneurship theory and empirical work implicated by a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship.

Social constructionism and the entrepreneurship debate

As an academic field, entrepreneurship contains several different basic perspectives and schools. One of the founders of the field, Schumpeter (1947) went into disciplines such as history, economic history and sociology in his life-long development of entrepreneurship theory. As of today, entrepreneurship is still studied within several disciplines such as economics, sociology and economic history (Thornton, 1999; Swedberg, 2000; Busenitz *et al.*, 2003). Within business studies, entrepreneurship research is primarily inspired by approaches from sociology, psychology and micro-economics, resulting in a focus on identifying, predicting and stimulating entrepreneurship (Aldrich and Baker, 2000; Venkataraman, 1997; Busenitz *et al.*, 2003).

Absence of basic assumptions
Given this multitude of scientific roots, identifying entrepreneurship as a phenomenon and/or creating clear boundaries of the academic field are important but not straightforward tasks (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Busenitz *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, there has been an ongoing debate for several years concerning the content and direction of entrepreneurship as a discipline in which current definitions, concepts and methodologies have been questioned (see Davidsson *et al.*, 2001). In

general, this questioning implies critical views of how entrepreneurship is defined and understood (Carsrud *et al.*, 1986; Gartner, 1988, 1990, 1993), what kind of methodologies that are used in research (Gartner and Birley, 2002) and what theories are used and how they are used (Zahra, 2007). There is also a wide range of established theoretical and empirical explanations at different levels of analysis, from the psychological micro-perspective explaining the traits of successful entrepreneur, to the economic macro-perspective, explaining the policies and incentive structures needed to increase entrepreneurial activities in society (Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). While most of this research is focused on one level of analysis there is multi-level research that tries to combine individual and context (Aldrich and Martinez, 2002); some claim that multi-level research is a distinct feature of entrepreneurship in relation to the general management literature (Busenitz *et al.*, 2003). In the current debate, many emphasize a general need to study social networks and entrepreneurial processes beyond individual entrepreneurs and their created organizations (Van de Ven *et al.*, 1999; Davidsson, 2000; Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001; Gartner, 2001; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2001; Bruyat and Julien, 2001; Gartner and Birley, 2002; Fletcher, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). As noted by Jones and Spicer (2005), the field is driven by its eternal failure to identify successful entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship positively, beforehand – a failure that will keep the field moving as long as it is seen as failure.

Despite this apparent multi-facetedness of contemporary entrepreneurship theories the field (i.e. papers presented at core conferences and published in leading journals) often seem to agree upon how to theorize, which is manifested in a lack of argumentation for new and/or existing research approaches with reference to basic philosophical assumptions on science (Aldrich and Baker, 1997; Grant and Perren, 2002; Pittaway, 2005). Indications of this can be found in several places in the current debate on the development of entrepreneurship as a research field. When reviewing the lack of qualitative studies in entrepreneurship literature, Gartner and Birley (2002) point to an institutionalized preoccupation with quantitative studies – but we are unable to find any discussion why qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies were originally developed and used in entrepreneurship research. In their analysis of the emergent field of entrepreneurship, Davidsson *et al.* (2001) find developments in terms of definitions, research problems, methodologies and theories – but not in terms of discussing the underlying view of reality, knowledge and ideology. The research debate within the field seems concerned with refining the existing research practices and adapting them to new theories and empirical phenomena without questioning the views of human beings, knowledge and "truth" that underlie these research practices. Busenitz *et al.* (2003) are of the opinion that emerging fields like entrepreneurship must discuss and define their ontological and epistemological positions – without offering any clear definitions themselves. In their critique of the field, Dery and Toulouse (1996) claim that new research results on entrepreneurship are often judged in relation to established research practices – implying that new knowledge on entrepreneurship is only seen as legitimate and acknowledged if established definitions, research questions, methods and theories have been used.

From our point-of-view, the major problem with mainstream preoccupation with deductive, quantitative, hypothesis-testing research is thus not these methodologies as such. The problem is that the lack of explicit discussion on underlying basic assumptions in entrepreneurship research tends to imply an un-reflective attitude to

the hidden claims and perspectives following from use of these methodologies. Behind the well-known set of statistical methodologies in the social sciences there are several unarticulated assumptions about ontology, epistemology and ideology that are actually problematic when applied to empirical entrepreneurship research. These assumptions – overlooked in order to make the phenomenon of entrepreneurship possible to investigate by means of the taken-for-granted methodologies – depict entrepreneurship as a logical mechanism in society that are caused by some variables and affecting others, thereby severely reducing the complexity of society and the economy. A dualistic world is assumed, where entrepreneurs, opportunities and technologies exist independently of each other. Likewise, entrepreneurs and their social interactions are reduced into simplistic models of psychological traits, rational decision making and economic exchange, and the entrepreneurial enterprises are rarely considered in research until they become registered firms and thus visible in official statistics. When successful, this research arrives at clear conclusions about correlations and cause-effect-relations in a much-simplified world, conclusions that allegedly make it possible to predict and stimulate the entrepreneurial *homo economicus* into further bold endeavours. Such knowledge is also presented as neutral and objective, free from any disturbing interaction between researcher and the subjects of study. The process of producing scientific knowledge thereby borrows legitimacy from the reality-depicting, truth-seeking natural sciences, when the major theoretical foundation on which it is built actually belongs to the - highly political, almost religious – *laissez-faire* economics taken-for-granted in Western capitalism.

To sum this up, most scientific discussion in the entrepreneurship field addresses different theoretical, practical and methodological problems in existing literature without questioning the basic assumptions behind these problems. We therefore would like to see a scientific debate on entrepreneurship research that relates to the view of reality and human beings (ontology), the view of knowledge (epistemology) and the views of what is good/legitimate and bad/illegitimate research (ideology) that always underlie all scientific inquiry, explicitly or implicitly (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Grant and Perren, 2002; Pittaway, 2005). One research perspective in the social sciences that has relevance to entrepreneurship research and that has developed such thorough paradigmatic assumptions is social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985, 1999). In other social science fields such as gender studies and organization theory, this view is commonly accepted as one of the major research perspectives (Gergen, 1999).

Entrepreneurial processes and social constructionism

Our main argument for using a social constructionist perspective is that a conscious and critical treatment of basic research assumptions will enhance the quality of research and imply that new and/or neglected phenomena and perspectives can be included in the field. Social constructionism is thus about pluralism in entrepreneurship research; it acknowledges different meanings about entrepreneurship, provides knowledge about interaction processes and describes complexity. For us, this means questioning prevalent definitions, methodologies and operationalisations of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in order to re-construct entrepreneurship theory and arriving at new research questions. This implies a changed focus in the view of entrepreneurial subjects, from single individuals to actor

networks and teams (Ben Hafaïedh, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). It will also mean a focus on the study of entrepreneurship as longitudinal processes of social interaction, and it should have consequences for the theoretical frameworks and use of theories in entrepreneurship research. A social constructionist research agenda should also imply new ways of finding entrepreneurial processes (our suggestion is to search for entrepreneurial temporary processes) and to employ qualitative fieldwork methods.

Individuals and collectives define themselves – and are defined by others – in relation to general expectations on how to behave and think. When doing and thinking differently, people usually combine such general expectations with new ideas and perspectives, constructing both sensibleness and strangeness (Spinosa *et al.*, 1997). We therefore claim that the entrepreneurial process can be characterized as boundary work, i.e. identifying, challenging and sometimes breaking institutionalized patterns, to temporarily both belong and deviate from what is taken-for-granted in the actors' social and cultural setting (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006). This boundary work must of course also involve influence and include others in society (e.g. people, organizations or societies). If "successful", the entrepreneurial process is temporary in the sense that institutionalised patterns are articulated and changed, and that the relevant context moves in the same direction as the process (Spinosa *et al.*, 1997; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003). A social constructionist view of entrepreneurship can thus also be seen in terms of a development of a becoming-perspective in which pluralism and emancipation are an outcome (Steyaert, 1997; Chia and King, 1998; Janssens and Steyaert, 2002).

Given this notion of what the entrepreneurial process is about one might of course object that all sorts of acts intended to deviate and change institutionalized action patterns in society could then be subject to entrepreneurship inquiry (Baumol, 1990; Rehn and Taalas, 2004). To such an objection the response is threefold. First, the choice of what entrepreneurial processes to study is an ideological one – the researcher cannot escape responsibility to make explicit statements concerning what kind of research is produced, how it can be used, and who is to benefit. Second, it is doubtful if empirical phenomena where almost no identification, challenge or deviation from institutionalized action patterns in society take place could be defined as an entrepreneurial process. From our point of view, studying small businesses started as followers in established industries might not always qualify as entrepreneurship research: it is important to evaluate the newness of the process in the context of society. Third, a social constructionist perspective does not imply that "anything goes". The field of entrepreneurship does not exist "out there" as a ready-made set of theories and objects of study; it is constantly constructed and re-constructed by the scientific community. All new inquiry will therefore be judged against the existing literature, and subject to critical evaluation. Any re-constructor(s) of the field will operate under the same conditions as any real-life entrepreneur – assuming the risk of deviating from current practices also means assuming the task of convincing the context of the advantages of newness.

What is – and what is not – social constructionism?
The history of social constructionism can be traced back to nineteenth century reactions to the dominating Cartesian positivist view of science that was formulated in

the wake of The Enlightenment. Ideologists of the emerging social sciences claimed that individual and social phenomena had to be studied through the subjective minds of individuals not only through observable behaviour. This view developed into what is usually referred to as social constructivism, is to be found in several leading social science disciplines. Examples related to business studies are cognitive research (Piaget, 1954; Weick, 1969) where the aim is to uncover the cognitive maps, categorizations and representations that guide human action (see also Gergen's (1999), distinction between constructivism and constructionism). Constructivism is still rooted in positivism in several ways. It presupposes a dualistic ontology separating man and reality (subjective and objective) implying that we can formulate objective truths about social phenomena beyond individuals' subjective interpretations of reality. Such reasoning often leads to cause-effect models implying that action can be explained and deducted from individual thoughts and intentions (Hosking and Hjorth, 2004). Individual thinking is transformed into scientific data through language, and language is thus seen as a true and objective mediator of intentions and interpretations.

In relation to this, social constructionism is explicitly based in a hermeneutic tradition where there is no knowledge beyond individuals' subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of reality. This ontological position is based on a rejection of the idea that true, objective facts and laws on human behaviour can ever be formulated or that societal processes can only be interpreted on how people construct and understand their reality and actions (Cunliffe, 2008). Man and reality are thus seen as inseparable and ideas, thoughts and actions are thus the result of ongoing processes of interactions and interpretations between human beings. In these processes, language is also subjectively and inter-subjectively understood, negotiated and re-formulated. Different approaches of social constructionist views can be found in literature; except for explicit constructionists like Berger and Luckmann (1966), there are also other examples such as Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism and Derrida's (1998) poststructuralism. The differences between the approaches usually concern research interests and levels of analysis creating tensions such as subjectivism versus inter-subjectivism, positive versus critical views, and macro versus micro process analysis (Cunliffe, 2008). From our point-of-view, these differences does not make social constructionism less useful as a basic perspective in entrepreneurship research – rather they underline the importance of carefully formulating the basic assumptions behind any research endeavour. We will give further examples of theoretical perspectives and fieldwork approaches in the next section of this article.

Ontological position

The ontological position of social constructionism as applied to entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs are subjectively and inter-subjectively understood by human beings. People can be regarded as active in the sense that they interpret and construct reality at the same time as these interpretations and constructions usually take place within the taken-for-granted boundaries of institutionalized cultural norms (Giddens, 1984). This implies that entrepreneurship and/or entrepreneurs exist through the interpretations made by individuals, groups of individuals and different cultures in society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This also

means that what and who are included and/or excluded in/from these conceptual categories may vary depending on which group of people you ask.

Given this ontology, entrepreneurship as a scientific field is also seen as a social construction based on a set of inter-subjectively shared beliefs amongst practitioners, policy-makers and scientists, rather than as a set of laws and indisputable truths (Astley, 1985). Examples of such popular – but still often implicit – beliefs concern where to find entrepreneurship (certain sectors and industries in the economy), what entrepreneurship means (starting firms and making them grow fast), who is an entrepreneur (a charismatic man) and the mindset of that entrepreneur (risk and achievement orientation). This socially constructed field is constantly constructed and re-constructed as policy-makers change their ideological and legal views, scientists develop new theoretical notions and initiate new lines of inquiry, and practitioners launch new enterprises with different degrees of awareness of how policy-makers and scientists perceive their enterprising.

Epistemological position
This ontological position directly influences the view of what knowledge about entrepreneurship means and how such knowledge is produced, that is, epistemology. From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge about entrepreneurship is knowledge on how individuals and collectives perceive, define, produce and re-produce entrepreneurial action in society. Scientific knowledge on entrepreneurship is thus produced through articulating and understanding how these individuals and collectives – subjectively and inter-subjectively – construct their entrepreneurial actions as unfolding processes (Fletcher, 2003; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003; Fletcher, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). Given that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs are socially constructed concepts it is therefore meaningful to create knowledge on the interaction processes in which the concepts are produced and reproduced (Steyaert, 1997). In this interaction process, questions of "how" and "why" is in focus, primarily from the aim of understanding. Entrepreneurship research usually implies normative questions like why and how opportunities arise, why and how some people are able to exploit them, and what the consequences are of this exploitation to individuals, stakeholders and society (Venkataraman, 1997). A social constructionist perspective would instead imply descriptive/interpretive inquiry into how and why opportunities, entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial processes and entrepreneurship are constructed in social interaction between people. It also implies that it becomes of less interest to make deductive studies with fixed operationalised concepts since knowledge and concepts are created in interaction between people and their interpreted environment. With this view on entrepreneurship, knowledge cannot be seen as objective and true, but rather as inter-subjective constructs.

Ideological position
Given the assumption that neutral, objective truth is not a relevant criterion for judging knowledge on entrepreneurship, otherwise implicit – and ideological – dimensions such as how we legitimize our research, our view of ethics, the role researcher plays in the reporting act, should have to be made explicit (Hosking and Hjorth, 2004). Established definitions, research questions, methodologies and theories on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs will thus be seen as the result of a process of

institutionalization and theory development will consequently imply critical questioning of these institutionalized beliefs. Since we have an institutionalized view of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs as desired phenomena in society, entrepreneurship theory can in that sense be seen as an inclusive/exclusive construct that affects general views of what is entrepreneurship and what is not, who is an entrepreneur and who is not. The importance of research thus also will have to be judged against how we can challenge institutionalized barriers in our way of integrating theories (Jonsson-Ahl, 2002; Grant and Perren, 2002; Holmquist, 2003), find new methods for research (Steyaert, 1997; Steyaert and Bouwen, 2000; Gartner and Birley, 2002), find entrepreneurship in new contexts and identify entrepreneurs outside current research populations (Cornwall, 1998; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003).

What is not social constructionism?
A social constructionist perspective is not "unique" in the sense that it implies new concepts, theories, research questions and fieldwork approaches as compared to the existing literature. Many of the concepts that we claim to be theoretical and empirical consequences of a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship can already be found at different places in the current debate, for example, the process perspective (Bhave, 1994; Van de Ven *et al.*, 1999; Brush *et al.*, 2001; Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2001), the notion of entrepreneurial teams (Burt, 2000; Birley and Stockley, 2001), societal and corporate entrepreneurship (Zahra, 1996; Cornwall, 1998; Kanter, 2000; Chell, 2007) or the research on networks and social capital (Hansen, 1995; Davidsson and Honig, 2003). What is often missing in this research is links between the various new concepts, their basic assumptions and empirical approaches. Without such explicit links, there is a clear risk that concepts and ideas – such as the abovementioned – will be defined in terms of the older concepts, studied using the same methods, with the result that their potential to challenge current theoretical bodies might thus not be realized (Grant and Perren, 2002). Moreover, a neglect of basic scientific assumptions may also cause inconsistencies in research in several ways. Widely known theories might be used as taken-for-granted bodies of knowledge, thereby forgetting the specific assumptions underpinning these theories, e.g. the voluntarist and rationalist views of individual choice on which most theories on market mechanisms and organizational decisions are based.

One example is the widely cited discussion on opportunity recognition in Shane and Venkataraman (2000), where they view technology as objectively existing and people as differing in their ways of recognizing and acting upon the opportunities inherent in technology (Sanz-Velasco, 2006; Görling and Rehn, 2008). This represents a dualistic view of reality, but it is not clear why that view should be held and why technology objectively exists (Busenitz *et al.*, 2003). From a constructionist perspective, technology should be regarded as socially constructed, containing no other meaning – or opportunity – than people assign to it (Fletcher, 2006).

This also implies that "qualitative" research is not necessarily constructionist research; it depends on what basic assumptions that the researcher(s) have defined from the outset. If you search for explanation rather than understanding, prediction instead of description/interpretation, it does not matter if this is done with qualitative or quantitative approaches – the body of knowledge is not social constructionist. If we view reality as constructions and not in terms of cause-effect relationships we need to

use appropriate theories. The aim of generating (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Bird, 1988) and testing hypotheses with ambitions of prediction and generalization are therefore not suitable with a social constructionist view. To reach such an aim, complex reality must be simplified into a narrow set of variables – making reality suitable for statistical analysis but depriving it of the original richness and ambiguity that made it interesting to study in the first place. It might even be argued that the tendency to focus on single concepts and analytical levels rather than embracing theoretical and empirical complexity is one of the weaknesses of entrepreneurship research in its ambitions to gain external legitimacy (Busenitz *et al.*, 2003).

To summarize, our call for a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship is not only aimed to put forward a new way of thinking and doing entrepreneurship research. It is also intended to stimulate a serious debate on the foundations of scientific inquiry within all perspectives of the entrepreneurship field – also those not embracing the social constructionist agenda. The main basic assumptions and consequences of a social constructionist view of entrepreneurship as they have been formulated above are summarized in Table I.

Applying a social constructionist approach to research

After having discussed the scientific foundations of a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship, we will now turn to what the consequences may be for theory and the practice of research. In the following section, we discuss the implications of studying entrepreneurial processes, what possible new theoretical inspirations are needed, the identification and choice of subjects of study, and possible new ways of looking at approaches and methodologies in empirical fieldwork.

Study focus: entrepreneurship constructed in interaction

By taking a social constructionist approach, we argue that entrepreneurship emerges dynamically in social interaction between people. People always interact in different forms with each other through meetings, through reading what others have written, through the Internet and so on. Hence, it is insufficient to talk about single entrepreneurs – in line with the growing literature on entrepreneurial teams – one could rather view it as several co-entrepreneurs creating an entrepreneurial process together (Lounsbury, 1998; Hitt *et al.*, 1999; Birley and Stockley, 2001; Brush *et al.*, 2001; Clarysse and Moray, 2004). Even in those cases when one single entrepreneur has

	Entrepreneurship as social construction
Ontological position (view of reality)	Entrepreneurship is inter-subjectively interpreted and constructed in social interaction between people
Epistemological position (view of knowledge)	Entrepreneurship research aims at creating understandings of how and why actors interpret and construct entrepreneurial processes. Knowledge on entrepreneurship represented as narrative, discursive and textual data
Ideological position (view of what legitimizes research)	Researcher participates in construction of theory and practice Awareness and responsibility required of researchers

Table I.
Entrepreneurship as social construction: basic assumptions and consequences

indeed performed the entrepreneurial act, interaction with a social context has still taken place (through upbringing, local culture, inspiration, idea generation, support and resistance). We tend to have an institutionalized need to embody entrepreneurship in single individuals of a special kind, leading us to put forward heroic individuals instead of collectives (Ogbor, 2000; Holmquist, 2003; Hosking and Hjorth, 2004; Ben Hafaïedh, 2006; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Sørensen, 2008). Even if different persons have had a different impact and different importance to the process we could still recognize the entrepreneurial process as a complex web of reciprocal interaction between culturally embedded actors closely connected (Francis and Sandberg, 2000; Jack and Anderson, 2002; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003).

A consequence of the view of entrepreneurship as socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985) is that single individuals and institutional conditions *per se* become less interesting for empirical inquiry. The single entrepreneur cannot be seen as embodiment of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon, and institutional conditions cannot be analyzed in terms of a given set of structural limitations to entrepreneurial action (Holmquist, 2003). Instead, the single individual can be seen as one of several individuals constructing entrepreneurial action, and in this process of construction, the institutional environment (be it on team, organizational, regional or national level) is a matter of subjective and inter-subjective interpretation (Louis, 1982; Chell, 2000). Actually, social interaction implies co-construction of self and process – individuals are continuously constructed through interaction at the same time as they construct entrepreneurial processes together (Hosking and Hjorth, 2004; Downing, 2005). While the empirical source of knowledge on entrepreneurship is still individuals – research focus is placed on how they interact over time and create meaning together.

According to the network approach, entrepreneurship emerges in interaction between individual actors and institutional structures (Kanter, 2000; Granovetter, 2000; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). Kanter (1992) describes entrepreneurship in terms of intra-organizational teamwork and the entrepreneurs as corporate entrepreneurs, intra-preneurs or idea generators (see also Galbraith, 1982; Birley, 1985). Likewise, Saxenian (2000) claims that the development of Silicon Valley – often said to be one of the most entrepreneurial regions in the world – is a result of continuous networking between individuals and between companies rather than of the discontinuous independent acts of lone individuals. Ideas and innovations are usually results of discussions, meetings, arguments or other forms of social interaction, implying that entrepreneurship is embedded in social structures (Granovetter, 1985; Jack and Anderson, 2002). The problem, as we see it, is that many network approaches implies an instrumental rationalization of social relations – friendship and other social contacts are studied as tools used by entrepreneurs in order to obtain financing and succeed with their business plans (Ucbarasan *et al.*, 2001). This can also be seen as a reflection of a mechanistic view of entrepreneurship as something that can be organized in the same way as daily repetitive operations in a firm.

This is not intended as a claim that creative organizing and networking is uninteresting from a constructionist perspective – on the contrary, it has been shown that social structures on different levels have a major impact on individual agency (Granovetter, 1985; Kanter, 2000). It is important, however, to consider the network as it is perceived by the (inter-)actors in the entrepreneurial process so that a regional and/or national level of analysis is not automatically assumed. The entrepreneurial act

might be pattern-breaking at one analytical level while an expression of conformity on another (Lounsbury, 1998).

From a social constructionist perspective, entrepreneurial processes could be studied as organic processes, as open-ended series of events in which people create/develop things together (Pettigrew, 1997; Aldrich, 2000). Such processes are continuously emerging, becoming, changing, as (inter)actors develop their understandings of their selves and their entrepreneurial reality. In order to understand how development within entrepreneurship unfolds we therefore need to study processes and follow these continuously over time. Consequently, if we are interested in development, change and critical moments we need to follow processes in a longitudinal way and preferably in real time (Pettigrew, 1997). A process perspective is important in that sense that it links past to present and future events, thus enabling us to understand why things turn out in a certain way (Brush *et al.*, 2001; Clarysse and Moray, 2004; Sundin and Tillmar, 2008). With a social constructionist view, it is more interesting to develop approaches and understandings of entrepreneurial processes than it is to identify how entrepreneurial networks should be ideally formed or assessing success factors of individual organizations with an ambition to predict and prescribe future. There is, of course, always the possibility to use descriptive analysis in the development of prescriptive conclusions (Davidsson, 2000), but that is not necessarily the guiding aim from this perspective.

Theory development: new theories and concepts
One important challenge for entrepreneurship research is to widen the field through reflective inclusion of theoretical bodies from other fields (Zahra, 2007). Entrepreneurship in theory and practice has already borrowed from fields such as leadership and management (Busenitz *et al.*, 2003) – a trend clearly visible not least in the field of corporate entrepreneurship or intra-preneurship (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990). Interpretive organizational change theories in general can thus be useful, both as sources of complementary perspectives to consider in the analysis of entrepreneurial processes, and as inspiration on how to intervene into these processes in empirical fieldwork. Depending on what ideological assumptions underlie each specific inquiry this can then be further developed through other concepts/theories. Both gender theory and critical management theory can be useful tools for understanding problems and conflicts within processes in terms of power relations and conformity to institutionalized action patterns. Likewise, theoretical bodies such as organizational culture and identity construction may contribute understandings of how people involved in entrepreneurial processes relate to each other and how the process affects their views of self (Downing, 2005; Mills and Pawson, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, there are other complementary theories/concepts that should also be of interest, such as social movements, teamwork, ethics, professions, leadership, organizational politics and historiography.

One clear example of a theoretical field that has been partly included in entrepreneurship theories is gender as social construction. Questions concerning how culturally constructions of gender, ethnicity etc. are related to the social construction of entrepreneurship on a societal level and how this affects unfolding entrepreneurial processes, has been emphasized. Like CEOs of large corporations, entrepreneurs are individually recognized as masculine super-human leaders and heroes (Chell, 1996;

Lounsbury, 1998; Bird and Brush, 2002; Ben Hafaïedh, 2006). The problem is that it depicts entrepreneurship as something for a select group rather than as a possibility for everyone in the same way as leadership theory tends to view leadership as an activity for a chosen few (Ogbor, 2000; Crevani *et al.*, 2007). Research has pointed towards that definitions of entrepreneurs are gendered: the individual should possess certain (masculine) characteristics (Jonsson-Ahl, 2002, 2003) and/or start a new firm. 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.

From a social constructionist perspective, people always have the potential to re-construct their identities, their capabilities and their lives – which means that it should be uncontroversial to acknowledge entrepreneurship as a future possibility for anybody. Most individuals never see themselves as potential leaders and/or entrepreneurs, thereby participating in the institutionalization of the concepts as excluding the many and including the few. Therefore, we need an image of entrepreneurship conveying a multitude of different ways of living and working; thus also a multitude of entrepreneurial identities (Berglund *et al.*, 2007; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2008). Through using theories from other fields, we may be able to view the actions and contexts of entrepreneurial processes in new and different ways, and this will contribute to the development of the field of entrepreneurship.

Empirical fieldwork: what to study
As many researchers have claimed, enterprise start-ups are not the only form that entrepreneurship can take, even though many changes, innovations and followers emerge from business-related circumstances and problems (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). A usual dilemma of studying enterprise start-ups is of course that it is impossible to say which of them that will actually be viewed as "entrepreneurial" after they have happened. Some claim that it is still possible to study entrepreneurship that way since the business idea or the created company is always new in some way and since entrepreneurship research should also be concerned with failures and accidental successes (Davidsson, 2000).

One problem of putting a view of entrepreneurship as boundary-challenging social processes into practical field research is still to know when and where these processes actually happen. This is a similar problem to the well-known difficulty of identifying entrepreneurs and successful firms before they are established (Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). One suggestion is to focus empirical inquiry on different sorts of projects intended to be entrepreneurial and/or innovative – such intentions are usually made explicit at early stages in projects (Holler, 1999; Clarysse and Moray, 2004). Projects are thus seen as temporary structured processes of social interaction intended to contribute something new to the environment from which they once emerged (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999; Hitt *et al.*, 1999). One should of course be aware that the formal project period does not encapsulate the whole process (idea generation often precedes the formal project and diffusion into the environment often happens much later) but that is different from project to project. In the case of art projects, most of the creative work happens within the formal temporal boundaries of the project, while many other projects do not start until the whole process has been thoroughly planned.

As subjects of study, projects share the advantage that they are clearly delineated efforts to identify new ideas, get things done and work in closely coupled teams (Hitt *et al.*, 1999). By studying this kind of event it should also be easier to delimit the entrepreneurial processes in a practical way. Many existing operations on the market were originally developed in temporary processes within and between organizations; processes that still exhibit all requisites of entrepreneurship such as new ideas, action-orientation, followers etc. (Zahra *et al.*, 1999; Kidder, 2000; Clarysse and Moray, 2004). When the entrepreneurial act is over, i.e. when the novelty or innovation has reached its market, the process is over and its result diffused into its context for further exploitation (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003). Moreover, in some cases, non-entrepreneurial processes are used as "windows of opportunity" that some people in the organization exploit in order to implement controversial ideas. While the result of the process lives on, the process itself ends and the team is scattered – and, perhaps, partly reassembled after a while to construct new processes together. In fact, this happens frequently also where newly created firms are concerned (March, 1995; Wright *et al.*, 1997).

Searching the empirical field for entrepreneurial processes rather than individuals starting ventures means opening up the empirical basis for entrepreneurship theory significantly. In the words of Davidsson and Wiklund (2001) this implies studies focused on the enterprise level rather than on individual or organizational levels (see also Van de Ven *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, it is not only acts formally called "projects" or "enterprises" that is of interest; entrepreneurial acts in the form of temporary sequences of action occur everywhere (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003). It implies a perspective where the process itself, not its structural form or context, is the definition, implication and outcome of entrepreneurship.

One consequence of this reasoning is that entrepreneurship should not necessarily require that a formal organization be created. Many organizing processes that have resulted in new products, services and lifestyles never led to the creation of firms although the structuring of operations is often seen as important by entrepreneurs themselves (Sölvell, 2008). One example is the long and dispersed process of organizing a network for computer communication between American universities that eventually became the Internet. Several cultural events can be just as pattern-breaking by organizing and generating new ways of looking at the world (Berglund *et al.*, 2007). There are also many examples of entrepreneurship that might happen outside existing organizational structures (e.g. in voluntary work and spontaneous political action), but also within existing organizations (e.g. innovative product development projects and radical corporate restructuring) (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990; Lounsbury, 1998; Hitt *et al.*, 1999; Clarysse and Moray, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Chell, 2007; Sundin and Tillmar, 2008).

Fieldwork approach and methodologies
The practical fieldwork methods usually connected with social constructionism are concerned both with obtaining empirical data and with analyzing/presenting those data. Given the ontological, epistemological and ideological assumptions of social constructionism, the way methods are used is more important than how methods are labelled. Within the stream of qualitative research on entrepreneurship there are, for example, both constructionist and non-constructionist participant observation studies,

and both constructionist and non-constructionist analyses of interview texts. What separates them is not the label but assumptions on how data are related to "reality", how data can be used in theory development and what long-term consequences methodological choices will have for entrepreneurship theory and practice.

From a social constructionist perspective, we can regard all empirical work as interactions between researchers and the people that that are studied. This means that all knowledge that that is created/constructed is the result of an interaction process that has been designed and initiated. Instead of seeing this as an unwanted deviation from the ideal of the neutral and unobtrusive scientist we can see it as a contribution to both theory building and practice (Gummesson, 1988). Research processes could then be designed as mutual learning processes where all involved can learn from each other (Lundin and Wirdenius, 1990). Moreover, such research processes could also be seen as an opportunity for practitioners and researchers to reflect and re-construct their identities (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001).

When considering different fieldwork approaches generated from our ontological, epistemological and ideological assumptions we should thus be aware that different "qualitative" methods imply differing degrees of obtrusiveness (e.g. standardized interviews as compared to action research). A related issue is also the time span of the empirical data collection work in relation to the time span of the actual processes being studied. If differences between these two time spans become too large one might question whether the researcher has been able to develop sufficient understanding of the process. Intervention approach, interaction design and longitudinality are thus important dimensions to consider in a social constructionist research process. By intervention approach we mean the researcher's intents on how to participate in the entrepreneurial process that is studied – from a constructionist perspective, studying means participating, and participating is an intentional act where the researcher is fully responsible for what happens. The characteristics of what is traditionally known as "action research" can thus be said to be valid for constructionist fieldwork. Within this assumption, there might be several alternative possible qualitative interaction designs such as participant observations and in-depth interviews, and methods of analysis, such as narrative analysis (Steyaert and Bouwen, 2000; Boje, 2001; O'Connor, 2002; Fletcher, 2003; Johansson, 2004; Downing, 2005; Hjorth, 2007), discourse analysis (Rigg, 2005), ethnography (Van Maanen, 1988; Kunda, 1992; O'Connor, 2002) and deconstruction (Calàs and Smircich, 1991; Jonsson-Ahl, 2002). Some recent examples within entrepreneurship research are also to be found in Steyaert and Hjorth (2003) and Hjorth and Steyaert (2004).

This suggests that a suitable methodology for studying entrepreneurial processes could be participant observation of cases of entrepreneurial processes where the researcher is a real-time observer of the social processes. We can also understand how/why problems arise, how/why people can perceive obstacles, how/why new ideas emerge etc. through in-depth interviews or stories from people involved in processes. Since we view entrepreneurial acts as collective experiences, the empirical basis concerning an entrepreneurial act cannot be the visible entrepreneur's story only. If different stories from different involved actors are brought together in the analysis, our understanding of the process could be much broader (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003). Moreover, this also calls for careful handling of questions concerning how language is viewed and used, the notion of discourses, and the importance of reflexivity throughout

the research process (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001; Fletcher, 2003; Rigg, 2005; Cunliffe, 2008). We should also be aware that there are different ways of handling these parts depending on situations and possibilities. For instance, an ethnographic study can be very suitable for this paradigm (O'Connor, 2002) but it is not always possible to conduct in practice due to access problems. Also, we usually get to know about entrepreneurial acts after they have happened.

All these different kinds of research methods could be used with a social constructionist perspective but it does not mean that employing these methods ensures that the whole process from basic assumptions through to theories and analysis is consistent with that perspective. For example, case studies within the field of entrepreneurship are usually based on qualitative fieldwork and aimed at improving our understanding of how individual entrepreneurs think, how ventures unfold, or how organizations host entrepreneurial initiatives. While consistent with several of the arguments stated above case study methodology does not *per se* imply a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship. Again, what is interesting from a social constructionist perspective is the aim of and therefore focus on understanding how/why people interact with each other and construct the entrepreneurial process, and descriptions and analyses consistent with this perspective. That implies an emphasis on how involved actors experience the process rather than describing facts, figures, decisions and individual background traits. Different research perspectives lead us to pose different research questions.

In summary, viewing entrepreneurship as social construction implies non-traditional views on how to identify entrepreneurship empirically, what theoretical bases that could be used, how to identify entrepreneurial processes, and what assumptions and methodological alternatives that can be used when performing empirical fieldwork. These views are increasingly applied in entrepreneurship research (Jonsson-Ahl, 2002; O'Connor, 2002; Rigg, 2005; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Mills and Pawson, 2006; Berglund *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2008; Sundin and Tillmar, 2008) and are summarised in Table II.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship research is a result of a long historical development of definitions, concepts and methods. While this development has been rather successful in academic

	Entrepreneurship as social construction
Study focus: entrepreneurship constructed in interaction	People constructing social processes intended to articulate, challenge and break established patterns
Theory development: new theories and concepts	Additional theories and concepts (i.e. identity theory, culture theory, gender theory, critical management theory)
Empirical fieldwork: what to study	Formal and non-formal projects created out of pattern-breaking ambitions
Fieldwork approach and methodologies	Researcher as a part of the processes (and thereby the results). Participative observation, in-depth interviews, stories, ethnographies, narrative analysis, deconstruction, discourse analysis

Table II.
Entrepreneurship as
social construction: Some
suggestions for empirical
research

terms there is always the risk of the field becoming less "entrepreneurial". Along with several other fields, entrepreneurship has adopted some taken-for-granted assumptions and views that could hamper further development. As a way of overcoming this we propose a social constructionist perspective on entrepreneurship. In this article, we have chosen to discuss three issues connected to the notion of "social constructed entrepreneurship": the basic assumptions of research (ontology, epistemology and ideology), the consequences for theory development and research design, and the process-oriented empirical inquiry on projects and other temporary enterprises intended to articulate, challenge and re-construct established action patterns and values in society.

Basic assumptions such as ontology, epistemology and ideology are what research paradigms are built upon. Given that paradigmatic development is desirable such assumptions must be conscious and subjected to intellectual debate (Grant and Perren, 2002; Busenitz *et al.*, 2003, Pittaway, 2005). We have proposed social constructionism as a source of challenges to traditional perspectives, theories and empirical work in entrepreneurship – and as an example of how a discussion on basic assumptions can inspire paradigmatic development. Articulating ontology, epistemology and ideology is necessary for the development of research practices and an enhanced awareness of potential problems concerning truth, validity, trustworthiness, empirical operationalisation and so forth.

The theoretical consequences of viewing entrepreneurship from a social constructionist perspective imply using other forms of approaches and other forms of conceptual frameworks (Steyaert, 1997). Examples of this can be cultural theory, gender theory, critical management theory, theories about group dynamics, theories about social movements etc. There are also other possibilities in existing theories about entrepreneurship that can be developed in an ontological/epistemological way by emphasizing interaction at the expense of structural- and actor-oriented views (institutional theory and network theory).

Empirically, research on business start-ups can be valuable from these perspectives but there are also other forms of interactions that could be studied as entrepreneurial. Non-profit start-ups, change-projects, cultural events and temporary political movements are all examples of alternative empirical bases that can be used in order to get an enhanced understanding of entrepreneurship (Lounsbury, 1998; Chell, 2007; Sundin and Tillmar, 2008; Sørensen, 2008). An important consequence is that people otherwise not considered as entrepreneurs can be included – empirically, practically and politically. This also calls for new methodological approaches that explicitly share the assumptions that social constructionist view are based on, such as in-depth narrative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork and action research.

According to Gartner and Birley (2002), there has been a long process of normalization of the field of entrepreneurship that has made certain definitions, methodologies and research problems more legitimate than other ones (see also Dery and Toulouse, 1996; McKinley *et al.*, 1999; Grant and Perren, 2002). Established principles of thought such as causality, generalization, prediction and statistical significance can be seen as ideologically based in an ideal where reality can be described in an objective and true manner. One example is the widespread search for statistically valid measures of characteristics of entrepreneurs and contextual factors yielding conclusions on what is "true" or "false" about entrepreneurship, what

behaviour is successful and what is not, and what policies that are "right" or "wrong". This can be seen both in delimited fields such as venture capital and women's entrepreneurship (Gatewood *et al.*, 2003) and across journals of entrepreneurship (Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). When subjected to a closer analysis it appears that most of these perspectives share an implicit view of reality as existing objectively and thus entrepreneurship as a tangible phenomenon that can be measured, predicted and stimulated (Chell and Pittaway, 1998; Pittaway, 2005). These basic assumptions are almost never discussed despite their massive influence on current research. In line with Aldrich and Baker (1997), one could wish for a more convincing argumentation for these research practices including explicit statements on what kind of knowledge that is produced, how it can be used and for what purposes it is produced.

While we agree with Shane and Venkataraman (2000), Davidsson and Wiklund (2001) and Busenitz *et al.* (2003) that the development towards a strengthened identity for entrepreneurship research bears much promise we also think that this identity should include a interest to discuss the basic assumptions on which scientific inquiry is built. In order to enhance awareness, we need to expose current concepts, theories and methods of entrepreneurship to discussion and critique. Otherwise, important appeals to develop entrepreneurship research through the inclusion of theories and methods used in other fields of social science (Gartner, 2001; Low, 2001) might not result in knowledge relevant or legitimate in those fields. It is time to reconsider entrepreneurship theory, to open up the academic discourse to different ways of building theories and conduct empirical fieldwork.

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