
Editorial

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1 Purpose of the special issue

The purpose of the special issue is to launch an academic debate on new trends in entrepreneurship research in terms of conceptual coverage and methodological advancements. In this respect, we particularly focus on the human action perspective, in which there is a perception of entrepreneurship as a human experience and interaction, with entrepreneurs as acting human beings. This standpoint is deeply rooted in a European tradition of interpreting entrepreneurship and is to some extent an approach that seems to bind the history of European entrepreneurship research together. As such, this special issue can be seen as an excellent way to communicate a European perspective on entrepreneurship research (Dana et al., 2008) and a starting point for reopening the debate on what characterises entrepreneurship and small business research in Europe that makes it distinct from the research in other parts of the world. Provided it is considered worthwhile, we also try to encourage scholars to answer the question about what can be done to further develop a European-ness in entrepreneurship and small business research. In this special issue we bring together some of the latest research results relating to the human action view of entrepreneurship. They focus on different aspects of the entrepreneurship phenomenon, from commitment, mindset or values to entrepreneurial learning. They use different methodological approaches, both qualitative and quantitative. But all four papers presented contribute to the European tradition of conducting entrepreneurial studies and strengthening the European perspective on entrepreneurship.

2 Europe: the birthplace of entrepreneurship research

For a long period, entrepreneurship research has been dominated by scholars from the US and the history of entrepreneurship research is mainly written from a US perspective – making it the norm in entrepreneurship research. However, entrepreneurship and small business research has a long tradition in Europe and in many ways Europe can be regarded as its birthplace. In this section we will briefly present the European entrepreneurship research heritage: the early contributions to entrepreneurship; the contributions by Joseph Schumpeter; and the decline of entrepreneurship and small businesses in European society during the early and mid-20th century.

2.1 *Early contributions to entrepreneurship knowledge*

The function of entrepreneurship is probably as old as exchange and trade between individuals in society (Carlen, 2016). However, it was not until the emergence of economic markets during the Middle Ages that the concept gained importance and authors started to take an interest in the phenomenon. For a long time, the European economy was locked in the feudal system with no assurance of property rights and local tolls hampering the free flow of products. During the Middle Ages these conditions slowly changed and a system evolved in which entrepreneurship was primarily embodied by a class of merchants who provided raw material to the market for finished goods. In addition, the rise of cities created an arena for entrepreneurship and economic dynamics. The legal framework was developed, property rights secured and economies monetised. Thus, by the 1700s the legal and institutional conditions had changed considerably in favour of entrepreneurship and economic development (Landström, 2005) and individuals started to reflect on the function of entrepreneurship in society. Over the subsequent centuries we can identify some pioneering thoughts about entrepreneurship:

- The French tradition: Represented by, for example, Richard Cantillon (although Irish born) and Jean-Baptiste Say, who were among the first to discuss the role and work of entrepreneurs.
- The British tradition: In particular the contributions by Alfred Marshall should be mentioned, as he recognised that efficient production could be conducted together by many small factories located in the same geographic area – an observation that later became important for our research on regional clusters and flexible specialisation.
- The German and Austrian traditions: This tradition is represented by the German Historical School of Economics (e.g., Gustav Schmoller) as well as the Austrian School of Economics (e.g., Carl Menger). Both schools were critical of the prevailing Classical Economics and in different ways argued for the importance of the entrepreneur and an entrepreneurial spirit in society.

2.2 *The contribution by Joseph Schumpeter*

Joseph Schumpeter is probably the best known of the economists with an interest in entrepreneurship at the beginning of the twentieth century. Throughout his career he tried to develop a theory of disequilibrium built on change and newness, and put the vision and will of individuals (the entrepreneurs) at the centre of his view of the capitalistic system.

In his book *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung* (1912) he took a first step towards building his economic theory. In particular, his view of the entrepreneur as an individual who breaks the equilibrium by introducing innovation has had a major impact on entrepreneurship scholars and the link between entrepreneurship and innovation has been important in the definition of entrepreneurship. Schumpeter was the first to treat innovation as an endogenous process – the entrepreneur as an innovator and prime mover of the economic system.

2.3 The decline of entrepreneurship in society

In the early and mid-20th century, the understanding of entrepreneurship was side-lined in Europe (Audretsch, 2014). The decreased interest in entrepreneurship coincided with the deep financial crisis in the 1930s and the macro-economic changes during the post-Second World War period, when politicians and policy-makers believed that it was possible to govern the economy in a good Keynesian spirit (Keynes, 1936), but also with the emergence of large-scale modern industrial companies – hence entrepreneurship and small business were increasingly pushed aside. Industrialisation and economic development were assumed to be based on mass production and large companies were believed to be more efficient as well as the most important driving force behind technological development (Henrekson, 1996) and new firm formation declined or stagnated, remaining at a low level for a considerable period of time (Carlsson et al., 2009, 2013). Thus, entrepreneurship and small business were more or less ignored in economic policy, not least in Europe, which was less inclined toward an entrepreneurial ideology than was the case in the US. This lack of interest in entrepreneurship and small business issues on the part of society reflected the situation in academia and research on entrepreneurship and small businesses was hardly considered at all in Europe until the 1970s and early 1980s.

3 Modern development of entrepreneurship research in Europe

The first signs of change emerged in connection with the strong turbulence in the world economy during the early 1970s, when many large companies in Europe were hit by severe economic problems. Thus, the 1970s was the decade of structural crises in many European economies, of which the UK was the first to be affected. The crisis also prompted an increased political interest in entrepreneurship and the small business sector, especially in the UK, where Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979. She changed the political agenda, including privatisation, deregulation, as well as the introduction of a new tax regime and a number of instruments to stimulate new and small businesses. The 1980s can be regarded as the decade of awareness of the economic importance of small businesses in Europe. This emergence of interest in entrepreneurship and small businesses was also found among academic scholars. In this section we will elaborate on some pioneering achievements in European entrepreneurship research that indicate a strong distinction between the research in the US and Europe, but also a development towards an increased international isomorphism in contemporary entrepreneurship research. We will end the section by asking whether we are losing the European-ness of entrepreneurship research.

3.1 *Pioneering achievements in European entrepreneurship research*

The scholarly interest in entrepreneurship and particularly small business emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The European research community was small, individualistic and enthusiastic – the research was to a large degree dependent on individual initiatives and projects. Great efforts were made to build a strong infrastructure within the field (Landström et al., 1997; Landström, 2019):

- Creating arenas for communication in terms of conferences. The ‘Rencontres de St. Gall’ established in 1948 was the first conference in Europe, but new conferences emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: EFMD Small Business Seminars, 1971; UK Small Firms Policy and Research Conference, 1979; Nordic Conference on Small Business Research, 1980; and the Workshop on Recent Research in Entrepreneurship (RENT), 1987.
- Creating publication opportunities for scholars within the field. The German language journal *Internationales Gewerbearchiv* launched in 1952 was the first journal in Europe, followed by the *European Small Business Journal* (today the *International Small Business Journal*) in 1982; *Piccola Empresa/Small Business* in 1987; *Revue Internationale PME* in 1987; *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* in 1989; and *Small Business Economics* in 1989.
- Creating teaching opportunities and academic positions for scholars in entrepreneurship and small business. For example, the number of chairs started to increase towards the end of the 1980s and PhD courses were launched, of which the European Doctoral Programme in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management – introduced by the European Council for Small Business (ECSB) in 1989 – should be mentioned.

Intellectually, a large number of research initiatives were taken in many European countries (Landström, 2019). These projects were often based on an increased political and policy interest in entrepreneurship and small business – and a lot of entrepreneurship and small business research at the time was financed by different policy institutions. Europe is a heterogeneous continent and to a high extent the research reflected contextual differences, where knowledge reflected historical, cultural, social and institutional differences between countries and regions that influenced the entrepreneurship activities taking place, leading to context-specific topics and problems (Zahra, 2007). Moreover, the research in Europe also reflected differences in research traditions in various European countries and as a consequence, enhanced the contextual heterogeneity of entrepreneurship and small business research. The conclusion to be made is that, for a long period, there was a strong contextual influence on European entrepreneurship and small business research and a strong divide between the research in the US and Europe.

3.2 *Contemporary entrepreneurship research in Europe*

Over recent decades we can identify a strong international isomorphism in entrepreneurship and small business research (Aldrich, 2000), where knowledge, research topics and methods become more similar across regions. Journal articles, workshops and international exchange of scholars are powerful forces for learning from each other and promote a common standard of evaluation (Wiklund et al., 2006). In addition, similar

reward systems are evolving around the world, based on accreditations and top journal publications (Pettigrew et al., 2014) and scholars all over the world perceive similar pressure to get published and create an impact (in terms of citations) (Rynes, 2007).

As a consequence, entrepreneurship and small business research in different regions tend to come closer together and we find a stronger convergence between research in the US and Europe. For example, Su et al. (2015) found an increased overlap in citations between entrepreneurship and small business research in the US and Europe. In the 1980s there were considerable differences, with only a 21.0% overlap rate in citations, but the rate increased to 37.4% in the 1990s and to 68.7% in the 2000s.

3.3 Are we losing the European-ness of entrepreneurship research?

Today, the differences between the US and Europe seem to be more a matter of emphasis and degree rather than in the fundamental character of the research (Brush et al., 2008). Of concern is whether it is still possible to find any ‘European-ness’ in the development of entrepreneurship research that creates an identity among European scholars, i.e., is there a particular intellectual characteristic or social structure in the research field that creates typically European research? Of course there is always a risk that such an analysis of regional differences will become oversimplified and glorify a vision of ‘us’ and stereotypes of the ‘others’ (Meyer and Boxenbaum, 2010) that will detract from the heterogeneity that can be found in all regions (Welter and Lasch, 2008).

Nevertheless, the first question to ask is: What characterises entrepreneurship and small business research in Europe that makes it different from the research in other regions? Even though it can be difficult to identify, potential answers could be:

- A strong variation in research, for example, with regard to a broader arsenal of methodologies (Brush et al., 2008; Neergaard, 2014), greater multi-disciplinarity (Gartner, 2013) and multi-level studies and analysis (Welter and Lasch, 2008).
- Strong relationships to policy, with an emphasis on the implications for regional development (e.g., Camagni, 1995; Giaoutzi et al., 2016).
- More context-dependent studies, with socio-economic, historical and cultural contextualisation (Hjorth et al., 2008) and a stronger critical engagement in the entrepreneurship discourse, challenging the ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of entrepreneurship (Gartner, 2013).
- Research interest in human action with theoretical frameworks drawn more from the social sciences and humanities and less from economics (Hjorth et al., 2008). This results in an intellectual orientation towards entrepreneurial development, in contrast to (high-)growth entrepreneurship (Welter and Lash, 2008) and seeing entrepreneurship only as a market-based phenomenon and an economic activity.

A second question is: What can be done to keep and develop a European-ness in entrepreneurship and small business research – provided it is considered worthwhile. One of the answers could be: strengthening the European community of researchers that continues to cultivate the heritage of Cantillon, Say, Schumpeter, Kirzner, von Mises and many other outstanding past and contemporary European entrepreneurship scholars. The idea of this special issue was born during one of the conferences of the European University Network on Entrepreneurship (ESU; <http://www.esu-network.eu>), which

could serve as an example of a European community for advancing entrepreneurship research. The main idea of the ESU concept is to gather individuals with similar views and interests who share their knowledge and experiences in both entrepreneurship research and education.

A core element of this concept is to develop a European network, fed by European culture and rooted in its diversity and specificities to facilitate, promote and foster both the research and the doctoral education in entrepreneurship. The ESU represents an academic ‘community in practice’ that values democratic dialogue between PhD students, researchers and professors. It facilitates entrepreneurial learning, the teaching of research competences in entrepreneurship and stimulates cross-national and multidisciplinary research groups in Europe to work together to pose innovative research questions and initiate projects to gain new understanding of entrepreneurship processes. The history of European research in entrepreneurship is an important element of the learning programme. Hence, the ESU offers a unique platform throughout the academic career from nascent PhD students to supervising professors for learning and working together in holistic entrepreneurial action and reflection-oriented processes. This occurs as interplay between an annual conference, a four phase PhD programme, shared research activities and publication processes.

4 The articles in the special issue

One dominant theme in the European tradition of entrepreneurship and small business research is the behavioural perspective of entrepreneurship. In this perspective, the entrepreneur is replaced by the agency, which is brought about by entrepreneurs who think, discover, create and enact. Taking the human action approach moves the research interest into how individuals create or discover opportunities and expands their research ambition towards exploring the dynamics of individual processes and their determinants. In this special issue we present four articles based on such an argumentation. In the next subsection we briefly summarise the key arguments and findings of these articles. The section ends with a synthesis of the contributions in the special issue.

4.1 The articles in the special issue

The first paper, authored by Anne-Flore Adam from the Burgundy School of Business and Laëtitia Gabay-Mariani from the University of Grenoble in France, relates to entrepreneurs’ commitment as an essential factor determining the intention-behaviour relationship. The paper is aimed at enhancing our understanding of the role and nature of entrepreneurial commitment in groups of intentional entrepreneurs. It focuses on affective, continuance (based on sunk cost or the lack of other alternatives) and normative components of commitment. During a two-year period, the authors followed and interviewed six entrepreneurs in the process of creating a new business. By applying an explorative and longitudinal approach with verbatim analysis as a method, they argue that intended entrepreneurs are guided by different commitment mindsets that stem from varying causes and produce different behavioural outcomes. This study presents a model illustrating the antecedents and consequences of four mindsets in the context of the entrepreneurial process.

The second paper, authored by Dagmar Ylva Hattenberg, Olga Belousova and Aard J. Groen from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, explores the entrepreneurial mindset (EMS). The goal is to introduce and discuss a theoretically informed definition of EMS, to compare it to other entrepreneurship concepts and to suggest some possible forms of measurement. The authors competently highlight the fact that the concept of EMS is descriptively robust and conceptually distinct from other concepts in entrepreneurship research. They use a systematic literature review approach to prove the incremental validity of EMS compared to other entrepreneurship concepts and how the individual is stressed in its conceptualisation.

The third paper, authored by Esther Hormiga from the University of Barcelona and Inmaculada Jaén from the University of Seville in Spain, focuses on gender and entrepreneurship. It explores the role of personal values in the formation of women's entrepreneurial intentions, discussed in the Spanish context of highly educated individuals. The paper draws from the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Schwartz's Values Theory but also discusses the findings in light of feminist theory. Therefore, it places the research spotlight on female entrepreneurs, whose personal values guide their intentions, choices and executed behaviours. The results of the study reinforce the understanding of the role of value priorities in shaping entrepreneurial intentions and confirm that individualistic values are positively associated with entrepreneurship, while collectivistic values have a negative association. The authors discuss the differences in value priorities between genders and argue for a more gender-neutral entrepreneurship perspective.

The fourth paper, authored by Gustav Hägg from Lund University in Sweden, explores the study group method in an entrepreneurship education framework. The entrepreneurial behaviour of an individual is determined by entrepreneurial learning which, in the entrepreneurship education context, often takes the form of peer learning and collaborative learning. By applying a transactive approach and focus group design, this paper illustrates how peers learn from and through entrepreneurial experience. On the theoretical level, the paper provides a better understanding of how the study group method helps students to develop entrepreneurial knowledge through the experiential learning process. It offers important hints for expanding research on instructional methods in entrepreneurship education. In terms of practical implications, the paper contains valuable suggestions on how cooperative learning may be applied as an instructional method in entrepreneurship education.

4.2 The contributions of the special issue

This special issue highlights the contribution of an interdisciplinary group of researchers from Europe. The included papers present a variety of topics, theoretical frameworks, levels of analysis and methods. Therefore, they bring together quite broad perspectives on entrepreneurship, but at the same time exemplify the type of research conducted within the European tradition and from the European perspective. In line with the purpose of this Special Issue, they polemically address key issues of a contemporary entrepreneurship debate: entrepreneurial mindset, entrepreneurs' commitment, entrepreneurial intentions and values, gender issues, as well as entrepreneurship education (cooperative learning, peer learning, experiential learning).

The common denominator of the four papers of the Special Issue is the assumption that the essence of entrepreneurship lies in human action and is elicited when behavioural

lenses are employed. The meaning of each of the concepts addressed by the authors is broadened when they are discussed in the context of human action and when the role of human agency in entrepreneurial processes is emphasised. The overarching goal of this collection of papers is to advance the understanding of the strength of European entrepreneurship research, which results from viewing the acting human being at the centre of entrepreneurship and highlighting an entrepreneur who thinks, discovers, creates and enacts.

In this editorial paper, we articulate and argue that it is important to maintain and further develop the European tradition of conducting entrepreneurship research and stress its distinctiveness. The four manuscripts in this Special Issue, both together and each in its own way, offer important insights into how we can better understand the European-ness in entrepreneurial studies. We hope that the selected papers bring new research ideas that can be a source of inspiration on both theoretical and methodological levels for many European and non-European scholars. We also believe that the idea of building a European research community in entrepreneurship has been revisited and consolidated.

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