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Promises, Premises . . . An Alternative View on the Effects of the Shane and Venkataraman 2000 AMR Note

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Abstract

In this article, we provide a contrasting view to that of the original authors about the impact of their Research Note on the promise of entrepreneurship (ENT) research. We draw on citations in the top general business journals to assess where, how, and why the Note was referenced. This leads to a consideration of issues related to citation "quality" and the various types of "impact" that can exist. In light of such issues related to the Note, and in light of the present state of legitimacy of the field, we argue that the Note may have in fact had a negative impact, specifically on theory development unique to ENT. We conclude with directions for moving forward in fulfilling the promise of the ENT field.

Keywords

entrepreneurship, theory, domain, opportunity

> The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
>
> But I have promises to keep,
>
> And miles to go before I sleep.
>
> Robert Frost

The Promise of Entrepreneurship (ENT)—More Than a Decade Later

We congratulate Shane and Venkataraman (S&V) on the praise they have garnered for their *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) Note *The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Research* (2000). The recognition of that particular work highlights the importance of the field of ENT as a fertile ground for theories that are relevant to the larger business phenomena. In this article, we provide alternative interpretations (contrasting the recent 2012 AMR reflections of S&V) of what their 2000 AMR Note has meant, especially to ENT, in the 12 years since its publication.[1] We do so by asking different questions than the ones S&V asked in their recent reflection pieces in AMR.

The Note was a short atheoretical article that defined a phenomenological domain of the infant management field of ENT as the nexus of the individual and the opportunity, focusing more on processes than outcomes. Although the most-cited article in ENT, and one that provided several definitions around which the field could congregate, the ENT field remained more than a decade since its publication a field arguably struggling for legitimacy, with no core distinctive theory (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2009). Our analysis of the Note and its effects provides lessons for other newly emergent management-related fields by focusing on how high but nonnormative citing of an article may unfortunately impede the theory-building necessary to legitimize a field. We first critique the Note and then argue its possible negative effects. We begin by asking where and how the Note was cited, and then ask why the Note was cited. We then answer what impact the Note has had on the ENT field and how we can move forward from that unfortunate impact.

Where and How the Note Was Cited

In contrast to Shane (2012) and Venkataraman, Sarasvathy, Dew, and Forster (2012), we find that the Note has *not* made a positive impact on the progress of theory because of where and how it has been cited. There has been minimal use of the Note to build or test theory in the top "general" outlets. AMR has published more than 30 ENT-related articles since the Note and none of those built on it (while several did cite

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it). When we look across the 24 "top business journals"[2] over the past 12 years, we find, on average, that each of the top *management discipline* journals published just more than one article every 2 years that cited the Note. Only one of these articles built on the Note, and it found that the Note's "nexus" definition was incomplete (Florin, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2003). It appears that the Note has had its greatest citation rates in alternative scholarly outlets, such as the *Journal of Business Venturing* (JBV)—a specialized journal where one of the Note's coauthors was the editor.

Let's consider then in more detail *how* the Note was cited. Shane's (2012) reflection summarizes his own informal bibliometric analysis by suggesting that the Note was cited mainly in reference to four ideas: (a) the distinctive domain of the field, (b) the definition of ENT as a process rather than a trait, (c) ENT as a nexus of individuals and opportunities, and (d) innovation as new means–ends relationships. Venkataraman et al.'s (2012) reflection summarizes their own informal bibliometric analysis by suggesting that the Note was cited mainly in reference to three ideas: (a) the individual differences across entrepreneurs, (b) the nature of entrepreneurial opportunities, and (c) the identification of entrepreneurial actions. Our bibliometric analysis of the Note in the top general business journals (see Table 1) identified three ideas as most often cited: (a) the nature of opportunities, (b) the definitions of ENT terms, and (c) the differences among individual entrepreneurs.[3]

The main problem with how the Note was cited does *not* lie with any disagreement over which ideas were most cited (even though each analysis considered different sets of scholarly outlets). The main problem lies with the manner in which citations used the Note. Our analysis reveals the Note was cited as a terminological reference rather than as a basis for theory-building or empirical testing. When an article needed to make reference to the term *opportunity*, or *entrepreneur*, or *entrepreneurship*; to questions over the domain or definition of the field; to the general steps of venture creation; or to differences in entrepreneurial activity, then the Note—as a terminology-rich, short, descriptive piece, published in a top journal—was a convenient citation source.

This is a very different type of "impact" on the field than that claimed by the Note's authors. Shane (2012) claims that the Note "has significantly impacted the field of entrepreneurship" (p. 10) in more substantive ways, such as influencing the focus of the field—for example, the Note's "introduction of the concept of opportunity has changed the focus of the field of entrepreneurship over the past ten years" (p. 16). We see no proof to support such a claim. While there may exist a *correlation* between the timing of the Note and the increase in articles covering the topic of opportunity, there is no evidence of *causation*.[4] In fact, the percentage of work on opportunities (in an ENT context) that cite the Note is quite low (less than 10%). Also, the Note did *not* introduce the concept of opportunity; the Note drew from more foundational and highly cited work—for example, of Casson, Drucker, Kirzner, Schumpeter, and Venkataraman (see Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). And, there were several alternative explanations for the growth of work on opportunities at that time—for example, the Internet boom and bust combined with the growth of day-trading and venture capital activity focused attention on opportunity valuation from 2000 on. In fact, there may have been a realization that the decades of work on traits-based ENT research was of limited value, and it was time to shift the research focus elsewhere; the topic of opportunities was an obvious choice given this is one of the main criteria that venture capitalists use to evaluate a new venture (e.g., MacMillan, Siegel, & Narasimha, 1985).

In sum, we simply do not see that the Note had a "significant" influence on management research. It did not influence research at the top generalist journals. The Note's core ideas were not used substantively—that is, as a basis for empirical testing or as a basis for theory-building. By contrast, the articles in those journals citing the Note *did* test and build on work by Stevenson, Kirzner, and Levi-Strauss, and did test and build on concepts like entrepreneurial orientation, the relational view, the knowledge-based view, and hypercompetition.[5] In other words, while the Note may have generated citations, there is little evidence of a positive influence on theory-building in the ENT field or in the broader management sciences.

Why the Note Was Cited

There are many reasons for why any article is cited. We believe that the Note provides an example of many of the possible reasons that are not related to the "scientific" advancement of the field, and propose this is the case because of the way it was written and where it was published.

There are two models that explain citation behavior (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2001)—"normative" (Merton, 1957) and "social constructionist" (Gilbert, 1977). The former includes the "scientific" reasons related to using the original article to create new knowledge in terms of the explanation and prediction of relevant phenomena. The latter includes the "self-interested" reasons (e.g., flattering editors—see Seglen, 1992, for a list) that have less to do with an article's content and more to do with the journal and its authors. We split the latter into two categories—"reference"-related, and "other." The normative model—the scientific reasons for citing—can involve testing a relationship among phenomena-relevant variables predicted in the cited work. It may also involve "theory-building"—that is, extending and correcting theory in the cited work or using it to contrast a proposed alternative theory. The Note was not cited this way in the top general journals because it was not written to be cited in that manner: First, the Note was *not* theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). It was a set of definitions, descriptions, research questions, and select literature reviews; it contained no propositions that explained a then-new "why" that related one factor to

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published? While bibliometric studies have gained traction for assessing the impact and cohesion of any one field (e.g., Cornelius et al., 2006; Schildt et al., 2006; Stigler, 1994), there is certainly room (although perhaps less occasion) to do so for any one piece or set of pieces.

8. Cooperating is both more costly and potentially more beneficial than defecting. It is more difficult to build on an existing core as the constraints and expectations are higher (e.g., benchmarks exist, and more detailed data and more sophisticated methods need to be used). It is potentially more beneficial as it is more likely to be cited, and more likely to be recognized as higher quality work, *when* the core is accepted (i.e., when other researchers also cooperate). Defecting is less costly but also potentially more beneficial than cooperating. It is less costly because it is easier to pick the low-hanging fruit, to do work under fewer constraints and fewer comparisons, to have more open space to work in (rather than having to find gaps in a set of cohesive existing pieces of a literature), to have fewer benchmarks (e.g., fewer empirical controls to include), and so on. It is potentially more beneficial (in net terms) *when* the article is lumped into (i.e., in a pooling sense) the high-quality work of cooperating researchers who are establishing a core—that is, when the article can exploit the positive reputation spillover of other work in the field.
9. More specifically, we characterize an APP as an article (a) that applies another domain's theoretical ideas to ENT-related issues, (b) where the article's ENT-related caveats could be eliminated from the propositions with the propositions remaining logically intact, (c) where core ENT-related dependent and explanatory variables are lacking in the article's proposed relationships, and (d) where the article's practical levers are secondary (or tertiary, etc.) in their effects on the main frictions within ENT phenomena. Of course, there are right ways to apply outside theory to a target field (e.g., transference as described by Albert & Anderson, 2010); APPs do not follow these ways and reinforce ENT as an application area.
10. Zahra (2005) explains this well: "In fact, looking at key ENT journals and conference proceedings, I cannot escape the fact that most of the research topics, issues, theories and designs have been imported" (p. 259). The point is that ENT research has drawn mostly on outside theories and ideas (Busenitz et al., 2003; Low, 2001; Romano & Ratnatunga, 1996); most often from other disciplines, like strategic management, marketing, sociology, and psychology (e.g., Phan, 2004).
11. We believe that the Note has been detrimental to the field in other ways as well. For example, some of its definitions have been "too open." In Shane and Venkataraman's (2001) *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) Response Dialogue piece, in the wake of the Internet bust, it was stunning to see S&V support the notion that the sale of Internet firms (as "new firm ideas") to "unsuspecting" investors was "evidence" of entrepreneurial opportunity exploitation (p. 14). We understand the need to remain consistent to their Note's reference to Casson's (1982) definition of opportunity, but that seemed to expose a glaring lack of precision in their definition—where that definition allowed the inclusion of some clearly "value-destroying" ventures (e.g., Kaplan, 2002) to be considered as acceptable examples of entrepreneurial activity. Such a definition is something that most present ENT researchers would strongly disagree with. Another example of the detriment to the field was the Note's clear targeting of one related discipline as being inadequate and insufficient to explain ENT, to test ENT, and to measure ENT performance. But the anti-"strategic management" bias contained in the Note has been rejected by a significant proportion of the field in the past decade (like those in the strategic ENT movement—for example, Ireland, Hitt, & Sirmon, 2003). While the Note advocated specifically against strategic management, it did endorse the use of other disciplines to inform research on ENT phenomena, especially those related to "individuals," such as psychology and sociology, and related subfields like cognition, learning, and decision making. While such an endorsement is sensible, a similar directive to that given to strategic management—about how to keep the ENT field distinctive—was missing.
12. To escape from the "too much diversity" end of the spectrum where the ENT field is now an "application area," its *marketplace of ideas*—from which a core set of theories can be identified—*needs to be made more efficient*. There are several actions that build upon the principle that the marketplace for ideas can be the best way to identify a theoretical core to build upon. Instead of controlling that market, or leaving it to anarchy, we propose that intelligent *market regulations* be enacted so that the market for ENT theory ideas may work more efficiently and effectively. To push that metaphor, we suggest regulations that make the ideas as transparent and easy-to-evaluate as possible so that informed "investors" (e.g., fellow researchers) can make their rational decisions (e.g., about accepting these ideas) quickly.
13. To move to the desired outcome in the PD, the field needs more repeat players, and a means to alter the payoffs. Repeat players come from strong doctoral programs, strong interest groups, special issues, incentives for repeat contributions, and researcher coordination. Payoffs can be altered by taking actions such as establishing an "A" journal (as *International Business* [IB] did with *Journal of International Business Studies*), moving to consensus on key definitions and clearly delineated research areas (where setting such borders has been easier in IB, figuratively and literally), having more teaching done by research-active instructors (vs. adjuncts), certifying widely accessible databases (or linking to ones in other fields), and so on.
14. There are several ways in which the ENT field can help itself gain legitimacy through development of unique theory. We suggest that the field explicitly adopts the kind of strict tests of "what theory is" as is done in medicine (e.g., Rutter,

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1983). There, the tests are (a) the theory must be universal (or nearly so) to the target (here, it must apply to all "entrepreneurial" phenomena), (b) the theory must be *unique* to the target (i.e., it must identify the causes of the target outcomes and it must not explain nontarget outcomes), (c) the theory must show causal precedence, and (d) the theory must show explanatory power. We also call on senior academic representatives to turn what appears to be a vicious cycle into a virtuous one. We need them to create a virtuous cycle that includes an "A" journal, a journal in which junior faculty can publish to make tenure in the field, to obtain seats on editorial boards and university administrations, to influence journal rankings and filtering as well as college funding, hiring, promotion, and teaching decisions, and so on. In other words, this endeavor to fulfill the promise of ENT as a field of research—as the Note was titled—will take more than time, and especially more than individualistic and opportunistic behavior; ironically, it will take some perhaps *unentrepreneurial*, collectively coordinated conduct to succeed.

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