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## Entrepreneurship through a qualitative lens: Insights on the construction and/or discovery of entrepreneurial opportunity

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### ABSTRACT

This article applies inductive analytic techniques to identify and elaborate on two recurring themes that underpin the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research – where entrepreneurial opportunities come from. The first theme is the unique role of *imprinting*, or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation available to them. Second, our analysis offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting. These insights are based on a thematic review of the nine studies that comprise this special issue on qualitative research. The nine studies, individually and each in their own way, offer key insights into how we might better understand the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunity.

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### 1. Executive summary

This article explores the various ways in which adopting a qualitative lens can help advance our understanding of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. Early research in entrepreneurship has traditionally relied primarily upon quantitative methods grounded in a positivist epistemology. We believe that this overreliance on quantitative methods has artificially constrained entrepreneurship research. While the use of quantitative methods has produced considerable knowledge accumulation, the field of entrepreneurship research has largely failed to develop an indigenous theory (Suddaby, 2014) and is often seen as a subset of strategic management theory. Entrepreneurship has failed to develop an indigenous theory because it has failed to generate a defining theoretical question or what Kuhn (1970) would describe as a “core puzzle.” This article, thus, explores how qualitative methods might be used to generate a theory for examining entrepreneurial settings. We focus on an emerging “puzzle” within the entrepreneurship research community – the origin of entrepreneurial opportunity – and draw from the nine outstanding qualitative studies of entrepreneurship that comprise this special issue to advance a new conceptual model. To illustrate our argument, we apply grounded theory analytic techniques to the studies generated for this special issue on qualitative methods in entrepreneurial research. This article applies inductive analytic techniques to identify and elaborate on two recurring themes that underpin the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research – where entrepreneurial opportunities come from. The first theme is the unique role of *imprinting*, or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation

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available to them. Second, our analysis offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting.

The nine studies in this special issue, individually and each in their own way, offer key insights into how we might better understand the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunity.

Our analysis of the nine outstanding papers that comprise this special issue of the *Journal of Business Venturing* offers insight into the emerging debate about the origins of entrepreneurial opportunity. We identify imprinting and reflexivity as key mechanisms and core constructs that underpin the larger tensions that question whether entrepreneurs discover opportunity or create it. That is, theorists who advocate a discovery perspective see imprinting as a key process that explains how some entrepreneurs are more likely than others to “discover” an opportunity. Reciprocally, theorists who advocate a creation perspective see reflexivity as a core construct that explains how some actors are better able to “create” entrepreneurial opportunity.

## 2. Introduction

This essay explores the various ways in which adopting a qualitative lens can help advance our understanding of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. Early research in entrepreneurship has traditionally relied primarily upon quantitative methods grounded in a positivist epistemology. We believe that this overreliance on quantitative methods has artificially constrained entrepreneurship research. While the use of quantitative methods has produced considerable knowledge accumulation, the field of entrepreneurship research has largely failed to develop an indigenous theory (Suddaby, 2014) and is often seen as a subset of strategic management theory. Entrepreneurship has failed to develop indigenous theory because it has failed to generate a defining theoretical question or what Kuhn (1970) would describe as a “core puzzle.”

We argue that qualitative methods are uniquely suited to address this issue. Scholars have traditionally employed qualitative methods to generate new theory and to impose conceptual order on new or relatively undefined phenomenon. More significantly qualitative methods can help researchers overcome the ideational ruts and cul-de-sacs of prior theories. The original intent of grounded theory, for example, was to encourage the discovery and elaboration of new conceptual categories “not contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 37). While there has been some debate as to whether the original intent of grounded theory can ever be achieved (Charmaz, 2009; Suddaby, 2010), there is considerable consensus that grounded theory, specifically, and qualitative methods, more generally, are the best hope for generating new, empirically based theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Entrepreneurship scholars have criticized the narrow range of methodologies used to study their phenomenon as overly reliant on quantitative methods and positivist thinking (Churchill, 1992; Van de Ven and Polley, 1992). Aldrich (1992, 2003) notes that “... entrepreneurship research is still very much a mono-method field, in spite of repeated calls for the field to free itself from dependence on mailed surveys and related questionnaire-based methods.” These methods, Gartner and Birley (2002: 387) observe, tend “to drive out what for us would often seem to be common sense, i.e., some concern for the intuitions we have in our experiences of working with and studying entrepreneurs”.

This essay, thus, explores how qualitative methods might be used to generate theory for examining entrepreneurial settings. We focus on an emerging “puzzle” within the entrepreneurship research community – the origin of entrepreneurial opportunity – and draw from the nine outstanding qualitative studies of entrepreneurship that comprise this special issue to advance a new conceptual model. To illustrate our argument, we apply grounded theory analytic techniques to the studies generated for this special issue on qualitative methods in entrepreneurial research. While these nine studies were not limited in any way in the topics they could write, we identify and elaborate two recurring themes that underpin the question of where entrepreneurial opportunities come from that appear in each one. First, each of the studies, in different ways, offers insight into the unique role of *imprinting* or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation available to them. Second, each of the studies offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting.

We describe these two constructs and the essential tension between them that helps construct entrepreneurial opportunity. However, we will first discuss entrepreneurial opportunity as the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research.

## 3. Entrepreneurial opportunity: a defining puzzle

Thomas Kuhn (1970) reminds us that any advance in knowledge accumulation is facilitated by “puzzles,” or agreed upon research questions and methods that help to define a scientific paradigm. There is, however, an interesting tension between puzzles and methods in understanding a phenomenon. Often, the puzzles that we elevate as defining questions for a phenomenon contain within them hidden assumptions that lead us to select some methods over others. If we are not careful, our choice of methods can constrain or bias our understanding of the phenomenon. Reciprocally, sometimes the selection of a new method can help reveal hidden assumptions and biases and lead to a process of refining and redefining research questions.

Research in entrepreneurship has struggled, over the years, to achieve consensus on its defining “puzzle”. Indeed, the field has sometimes struggled to define its core phenomenon (Gartner, 2001; Low and MacMillan, 1988; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Recently, however, scholars appear to have reached an emergent consensus on a defining puzzle that focuses on the origins of *entrepreneurial opportunity* (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Sarasvathy et al., 2010; Shane, 2000). And, as is typical for paradigm defining puzzles, scholars are debating fundamental questions about the epistemological and ontological nature of entrepreneurial opportunities.

That is, do they exist as objective empirical gaps in the “real” world waiting to be discovered? Alternatively, do they arise out of the actions of entrepreneurs themselves (Alvarez and Barney, 2007)?

These two perspectives, thus, decompose the core puzzle of where entrepreneurial opportunities originate, into two possibilities – entrepreneurs discover or create them. Both options depend on distinctly different assumptions about the nature of the world and how we, as researchers, might know it. In the balance of this section, we elaborate upon the current arguments underpinning each conceptualization of entrepreneurial opportunity.

#### 4. Entrepreneurship opportunities are discovered

Scholars' dominant view of entrepreneurship is that opportunities are ‘discovered’ by entrepreneurs. This view by scholars is based on a positivist epistemology and argues that opportunities are objective realities that exist in the environment and are “discovered” as a result of the unique characteristics of individual entrepreneurs (Shane, 2012). Thus, in this perspective, the U.S. retail coffee giants Gloria Jeans and Caribou resulted from the founders' individual characteristics, experiential background and cognition that permitted them to identify and act on a gap in the coffee market that was largely invisible to other actors.

Much of the research in this area identifies the unique elements of the individual entrepreneur that give them the ability to see opportunities that most other individuals overlook. These elements fall under the broad construct of *entrepreneurial orientation* and include factors such as innovativeness, a propensity to risk, and provocativeness (Miller, 1983). Scholars have also identified education as a key characteristic of entrepreneurship (Shane, 2000).

Subsequent research on entrepreneurial orientation has adopted the logic of configurational theory (Meyer et al., 1993) with a view to identifying the best “fit” between the characteristics of the entrepreneur and elements of the entrepreneurial environment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the findings demonstrate a positive relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance (Wales et al., 2013). So, for example, a meta-analysis of fifty-one studies of entrepreneurial orientation found that firm size and industry moderated the positive relationship between orientation and performance (Rauch et al., 2009). A second meta-analysis (Saeed et al., 2014) identified key cultural characteristics that moderated the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance, noting that orientation had the greatest impact in countries characterized by uncertainty avoidance, low power distance, high collectivism and political stability.

While much of the early research on entrepreneurial orientation examined firm-level characteristics (Dess and Lumpkin, 2005; Miller, 1983), more recently the focus has been on identifying attributes of individual entrepreneurs that foster an orientation toward entrepreneurship (Eckhardt and Shane, 2013; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2011). The defining characteristic of this perspective, however, is the epistemological assumption that entrepreneurial opportunities exist in the environment in an objective sense. Moreover, these opportunities exist prior to entrepreneurs' awareness of them. Entrepreneurship opportunity, thus, occurs as a matter of objective discovery and the focus of entrepreneurial research should be to identify the conditions in the environment that provide such opportunities and the characteristics of entrepreneurs that predispose them to such discovery.

#### 5. Entrepreneurship opportunities are created

An emerging alternative view is that entrepreneurial opportunities do not exist in an objective fashion, nor do they exist prior to the awareness of entrepreneurs. Rather, “creation opportunities are social constructions that do not exist independently of entrepreneurs' perceptions” (Alvarez and Barney, 2007: 15). This perspective acknowledges that certain objective conditions in the environment, such as technological advances, political or regulatory climate and demographic shifts, contribute to entrepreneurial opportunity. However, this view argues that entrepreneurial opportunities are ultimately determined, not in an exogenous fashion by the external environment, but rather in an endogenous way, through the creative imagination and social skill of the entrepreneur.

Thus, when Steve Jobs created the iPhone, he did not see a pre-existing gap in the competitive environment or in consumer demands to fill. Rather, he recognized that he could create and promote a product that consumers did not even realize they wanted. Similarly, when Edison created the electric light bulb, he supplemented the innovation effort with a tremendous effort to legitimize the product – i.e., to socially construct the conditions for consumer acceptance of a product that had no prior contextual understanding or awareness in the marketplace (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001).

Entrepreneurship opportunity, from this point of view, extends beyond identifying and filling gaps in the market. Entrepreneurship opportunity exists in a broader social or cultural context and is articulated through the interaction of an entrepreneur's unique and creative perceptions and the demands of the marketplace. Entrepreneurship opportunity, thus, is a product of both creative imagination (Lachmann, 1986) and effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001, 2008). In this view, entrepreneurial opportunities arise, largely, as a process of collective sense making (Alvarez and Barney, 2010). The entrepreneur must innovate products while simultaneously innovating social acceptance for those products in the marketplace.

In this view, successful opportunity creation is an act of institutional entrepreneurship in which the entrepreneur must mobilize resources that transform or create environmental conditions that favor his or her interests (DiMaggio, 1988). Accomplishing this mobilization of resources requires considerable social skill (Fligstein, 2001) in persuading audiences of the need for their innovation (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This view of entrepreneurship can operate at the level of the individual (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001), but it more typically operates at the level of the firm acting against the backdrop of an organizational field (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006).

The defining characteristic of this view, however, is that entrepreneurial opportunity is not an objective phenomenon that occurs within the environment prior to the agency of the entrepreneur. Rather, entrepreneurial opportunities are endogenous and iterative acts of creation in which the entrepreneur socially constructs both the opportunity and the product or service.

## 6. Creation and discovery?

The distinction between these two approaches is based, largely, on different epistemological assumptions about the nature of entrepreneurship opportunity. Discovery theorists see the world as “real” and view entrepreneurs as scientists who reveal opportunity in the same way that Newton exposed the nature of gravity. Creation theorists see the world as “socially constructed” and view entrepreneurs as artists who produce opportunity in the same way that Hemingway wrote *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Some theorists see room for reconciliation between these two approaches. Sarasvathy, for example, distinguish between causal and effectual explanations of entrepreneurship opportunity, which roughly correlate with the distinction between discovery and creation (Sarasvathy, 2001). Rather than suggesting that these two options are contradictory and therefore incommensurable, Sarasvathy (2001) suggest that they are simply two different contingencies and that one or the other might predominate under different contextual conditions. Garud and Giuliani (2013) make a somewhat similar argument with their “narrative perspective” which acknowledges the possibility of both creation and discovery occurring simultaneously but characterized with different degrees of agency under varying social and temporal conditions.

Alvarez and Barney (2005, 2007), however, reject the idea of conflating two contradictory views of entrepreneurship, noting that they are, in fact, two different theories with incommensurable assumptions about the nature of the world and how we might gain knowledge of that world. Rather than debating which theory is better, they conclude, researchers in entrepreneurship should “recognize the value, and the limitations, of each of these theories, and to specify the conditions under which each should be applied” (Alvarez and Barney, 2005, 2007).

## 7. Imprinting and reflexivity

Our inductive analysis of the nine papers that comprise this special issue, summarized in Table 1 (See Table 1), offers an alternative perspective on this debate. Although the Call for Papers for this special issue focused exclusively on methodology – i.e., we sought to encourage high-quality qualitative research on any and all aspects of entrepreneurship – several of the papers directly address the question of where entrepreneurial opportunities come from. Given that the intent of the special issue was to demonstrate the ability

**Table 1**

Summary of how entrepreneurial opportunity is theorized in each paper.

Title	Authors	View of entrepreneurial opportunity	Sample	Principal findings
Opportunities and institutions: A co-creation story of the king crab industry	Alvarez, Young	Constructivist/interpretive = reflexive	Single case in North America – Wakefield Seafood	Agency of entrepreneur enters into formation of industry standards – incentive to set the standards for an industry.
How should we divide the pie? Equity distribution and its impact on entrepreneurial teams	Breugst, Patzelt, Rathgeber	Deterministic/realist = imprint	8 entrepreneurial teams in Europe	The perceptions of justice amongst team members at the initial stages of equity division have a profound imprinting effect on the long-run success of the entrepreneurial venture.
Entrepreneurial legacy: Toward a theory of how some family firms nurture transgenerational entrepreneurship	Jasbiewicz Combs, Rau	Deterministic/realist = imprint	21 German wineries on average in 11th generation of operation	An entrepreneurial legacy affects strategic actions – firms must have a strategy for imprinting to be successful.
Emotional arousal and entrepreneurial outcomes: Combining qualitative methods to elaborate theory	Jennings, Edwards, Jennings, Delbridge	Constructivist/interpretive = reflexive	38 interviews in super yacht industry	Project considerations, actor considerations, and venue considerations impact entrepreneurial emotional arousal.
Institutional entrepreneurs' social mobility in organizational fields	Waldron, Fisher, Navis	Constructivist/interpretive = reflexive	Single case in North America – Rainforest Action Network	Peripheral entrepreneurs can employ rhetoric to enable their social mobility.
Embedded entrepreneurship in the creative re-construction of place	McKeever Jack, Anderson	Deterministic/realist = imprint	2 depleted communities in Northern Ireland – 10 respondents in both communities	Social bonds and affinity to community central to successful entrepreneurship in economically challenged area
Entrepreneurial inception: The role of imprinting in entrepreneurial action	Mathias, Williams, Smith	Deterministic/realist = imprint	25 entrepreneurs in North America	Sources of imprinting impact how the entrepreneur actions today & in the future.
Failed, not finished: A narrative approach to understanding venture failure stigmatization	Singh, Corner, Pavolvich	Constructivist/interpretive = reflexive	12 cases of entrepreneurial failures in New Zealand	Introduce concept of “epiphanies” in which entrepreneurs change failure to learning
The evidence of interorganizational relationships in emerging ventures: An ethnographic study within the new process development process	Marion, Eddleman, Friar, Deeds	Constructivist/interpretive = reflexive	14 entrepreneurial ventures	Entrepreneurial success is the result of the degree of attentiveness of entrepreneurial firms in constructing interorganizational networks.

of qualitative research to generate fresh theoretical insight, we decided to systematically analyze the papers in an effort to identify key constructs that might enhance our understanding of the core puzzle of the relative pervasiveness of entrepreneurial creation or discovery.

Accordingly, we divided the final papers into two categories, those that appeared to adopt a deterministic/realist ontology about entrepreneurship and those that appeared to adopt a constructivist/interpretive ontology. Of the nine papers, four clearly fell into the first category.

Perhaps the most representative of this group is the paper by Mathias et al. (in press) titled “Entrepreneurial Inception: The Role of Imprinting in Entrepreneurial Action.” Using semi-structured interviews and archival analysis, the authors analyze the formative experiences of 25 entrepreneurs during sensitive periods of transition. These formative elements of the external environment, the authors argue, serve as sources of a “lasting and persistent stamp on entrepreneurs” that influence their future ability to recognize entrepreneurial opportunities. Mathias et al., in press identify a range of recurrent *sources of imprinting*, including influential people (family, friends), practices (work experiences, hobbies, exposure to technology) and temporal phases of life (young or impressionable age) in which the external environment indelibly impresses itself on individuals and, under certain contingencies, condition them toward entrepreneurial discovery.

A second paper that also uses the concept of imprinting appears in the paper titled “Entrepreneurial Legacy: Toward a Theory of How Some Family Firms Nurture Trans-generational Entrepreneurship” by Jaskiewicz et al. (in press). The paper also uses archival analysis and semi-structured interviews with key informants of twenty-one enduring German wineries that are, on average, in their eleventh generation of operation. Seeking to understand how these family firms have endured for so long, the authors determine that the families’ ability to systemically embed the entrepreneurial values and spirit of the founder onto at least one member of each successive generation is the key to success. That is, like the Mathias et al. (in press) finding above, entrepreneurial opportunity is sustained by a deliberate effort to imprint entrepreneurial spirit within the family. In contrast to Mathias et al., in press that sees imprinting dependent upon the somewhat random and vicarious effects of the external environment, in Mathias et al., in press sees imprinting as purposeful and strategic and the environments is the somewhat self-contained structure of the extended family.

The third study that reinforces a “realist” ontology of entrepreneurial opportunity is MacKeever et al. (in press) titled “Embedded Entrepreneurship in the Creative Reconstruction of Place.” In this ethnographic study of two depleted communities in Northern Ireland, the authors focus on understanding how individuals who are highly embedded in their local context identify entrepreneurial opportunities. MacKeever et al., in press do not explicitly use the construct of imprinting. However, they conclude that entrepreneurial opportunity is the result of a nexus of affinity between the individual and the community and it is the combination of long-term association with both the geography and local population that provides some individuals with the preferential ability to discover opportunities for change.

The final paper in this group is, “How Should We Divide the Pie? Equity Distribution and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Teams” by Breugst et al. (in press). The authors offer a comparative case study of eight entrepreneurial teams with a specific focus on the initial division of equity amongst team members. The study finds that the perceptions of justice amongst team members at the initial stages of equity division have a profound imprinting effect on the long-run success of the entrepreneurial venture. When team members share the initial perception that the distribution of profits is fair, they create a team context of trust and cohesion that produces a positive team interaction spiral that contributes to the success of the venture. If the initial perception is that the division of equity is not just, the team lacks trust and cohesion producing a negative team interaction spiral.

This paper shares the assumption that entrepreneurial opportunity is the result of objective factors in the environment. Similar to the Jaskiewicz et al., in press paper, however, this study views imprinting as a social phenomenon and sees the team itself as an extension of the external environment. Also similar to Jaskiewicz et al., in press these authors identify a high degree of potential agency within the team to positively manage the process by which social imprinting occurs. Once imprinted, however, the authors conclude that team members’ perceptions of the environment have a long-lasting effect that determines team interactions and ultimately team success in a path-dependent fashion far into the future.

Collectively these four papers adopt the assumption that opportunities exist in the environment external to the entrepreneur. The papers vary somewhat in how they characterize the external environment. In Mathias et al., in press, a wide variety of factors constitute the environment, including personal experience, friends, family and hobbies. In Jaskiewicz et al., in press, the construct of environment is more constrained (i.e., the family), works over a much longer term, and is much more deliberate, if not strategic. MacKeever et al., in press revert to a broader notion of the environment that includes elements of time (i.e., history), place (i.e., geography) and people.

Each of them, however, identifies a similar mechanism by which the environment imposes individual differences in the ability to “discover” opportunity. That mechanism is “imprinting.” It describes a range of processes by which the environment interacts with individuals and, in some rare cases, confers unique capabilities on some individuals to identify gaps in existing social and economic arrangements that others have overlooked. While the entrepreneurs in these accounts clearly enjoyed some degree of agency, scholars largely attribute the origin of that agency to the influence of the environmental milieu in which the entrepreneur was embedded.

Five papers adopted a set of constructivist/interpretive assumptions by which the authors see entrepreneurial opportunity as deriving from the reflexivity of the entrepreneur. Opportunity is created, not discovered, in these studies.

Perhaps the best illustration of this viewpoint is in the Alvarez et al. (forthcoming) paper titled “Opportunities and Institution: A Co-creation Story of the King Crab Industry”. Using primarily archival/historical research methods of a single case study, supplemented with semi-structured interviews, the authors sought to understand how Wakefield Seafood, and its founder, was able to legitimate king crab as a mass-market food and, simultaneously, protect the industry from unsustainable business practices. Alvarez and Young conclude that the agency of the entrepreneurs was a critical factor in the success, not only of the company, but, rather, of the industry

itself. More significantly, they attribute the success of this case of entrepreneurship as the direct result of the creative vision and energy of the founder. While they don't use the term directly, the individual entrepreneur enjoyed a unique degree of reflexivity and awareness of the institutional environment in which he was embedded.

An equally powerful demonstration of the role of reflexivity in creating entrepreneurial opportunity is evident in the Jennings et al. (in press) paper titled "Emotional Arousal and Entrepreneurial Outcomes: Combining Qualitative Methods to Elaborate Theory." The authors study acts of entrepreneurship in the super yacht industry and seek to understand the role of emotion and dramaturgy in acts of entrepreneurship. The study is notable by its use of two somewhat unique methods, longitudinal content analysis and case vignettes. The key finding in the paper is that entrepreneurial opportunities can be generated by the collective reflexivity of designers, owners and shipyard managers that is triggered by emotions. Jennings et al., in press, thus, reinforce the understanding that opportunity is created and, perhaps more significantly, identify ways in which that reflexivity is stimulated by the agency of actors within an organizational context.

The Waldron et al. (in press) paper titled "Institutional Entrepreneur's Social Mobility in Organizational Fields" also adopts the perspective that successful entrepreneurs create rather than discover opportunity. The authors provide a case study of a single organization, the activist not-for-profit Rainforest Action Network (RAN). Their analysis, based on both historical/archival materials and detailed rhetorical analyses, demonstrates how the organization pursued their altruistic social activist project to improve ecological standards in the lumber industry while simultaneously pursuing their own self-interested project of enhancing their own status position relative to other home-improvement organizations. They conclude that successful activist entrepreneurs co-create both their core project of social change and their own project of social mobility. An implicit but important element of their findings is that in order to successfully change wood sourcing standards in the retail lumber industry, RAN had to acquire a comprehensive awareness of the broader organizational field and the status position that it occupied in the field. That is, peripheral entrepreneurs must have the reflexive capacity to recognize their position within an organizational field and creatively use language to construct an alternative vision of the field that enhances both their intended entrepreneurial change and a new elite status for themselves within the field.

The fourth paper that acknowledges the importance of entrepreneurial reflexivity is by Singh et al. (in press) titled "Failed but Not Finished: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Venture Failure Stigmatization." This paper is unique in that does not address entrepreneurial success but rather tries to understand how entrepreneurs deal with failure. The authors use narrative analytic techniques to study the effects of stigmatization on entrepreneurial failure. They focus on twelve key instances of stigmatization. One of the key findings is that stigmatization ultimately triggers epiphanies or deep personal insights, which transform entrepreneurs' view of failure from a very negative to a positive life experience.

Although the paper does not explicitly take a position on the issue of whether entrepreneurship is the result of creation rather than discovery, it does so implicitly. That is, the paper acknowledges that a significant component of the failed venture was the absence of the deep personal insight or awareness of the opportunities (or constraints) made visible (or invisible) in the individual entrepreneurs world-view, not only of their external environment but also of their own individual potential. Stigmatization, the authors observe, like entrepreneurship is a process that unfolds over time. Moreover, the process of stigmatization is indelibly connected to the process by which entrepreneurial windows of opportunity start to close. Thus, at least implicitly, Singh et al. (in press) see entrepreneurial opportunity as a process of social construction – and one that can be negatively influenced by the stigma of failure. However, a key final insight offered by the paper is that reflection on the experience of stigma can generate new instances of entrepreneurial opportunity creation.

The final paper that sees entrepreneurial opportunity as an act of creation is presented by Marion et al. (in press) and is titled "The Evolution of Interorganizational Relationships in Emerging Ventures: An Ethnographic Study within the New Product Development Process." Using ethnographic methods to study fourteen different entrepreneurial ventures, the authors conclude that entrepreneurial success is the result of the degree of attentiveness of entrepreneurial firms in constructing interorganizational networks. Opportunity, in this study, is the product of the clear and focused attention paid to the composition of interorganizational networks by the focal firms.

Indeed, in most cases, the entrepreneurs are more attentive to the socio-emotional strength of their relationships with network partners than to the particular entrepreneurial project or venture. In some cases, the socio-emotional bond actually impeded the project, but strengthened the network. A clear conclusion of this paper, therefore, is that the interorganizational network is more important than a specific entrepreneurial venture because, even if the current venture were to fail, another opportunity might emerge from the network. Opportunities, thus, result from the interactions and relationships of actors in key networks and the awareness of entrepreneurial opportunity is created by the trust and cohesion embedded in the socio-emotional strength of the actors who comprise the network.

Collectively these five papers point to an alternative construct – reflexivity – that derives more directly from the assumptive perspective that entrepreneurs create rather than discover opportunities. That is, these studies suggest that some individuals are differentially endowed with the ability to see alternative social and economic arrangements in their environment. More significantly, these are not pre-existing realities that only require clarification. Rather, the opportunities are generated by reflection on the possibility of new and creative social realities.

## 8. Essential tensions

Our preliminary open coding of the papers in this special issue reveals two key constructs that underpin the distinction between seeing entrepreneurial opportunity as being created or discovered. Both perspectives vary tremendously in the relative influence they attribute to *reflexivity* and *imprinting* in processes of entrepreneurship. Reflexivity refers to an assumptive high degree of self-

awareness of the entrepreneurial actor to the constraints constructed by the social, political and economic context within which the entrepreneur is embedded. This insight permits the entrepreneur not only to identify these constraints, but also to envision and alter institutional arrangement. Imprinting refers to the enduring influence of both constraints and opportunities embedded in the social, political and economic context surrounding the entrepreneur.

A more detailed reading of the papers, with a specific focus on those elements that refer to reflexivity and imprinting (both explicitly and implicitly), reveals several subsidiary differences between the constructs and how creationists and discovery theorists use them. In the balance of this essay we identify and elaborate upon four key distinctions. First, the two constructs describe distinct assumptions about the nature of the entrepreneur's perception of the *external environment*. Second, the two constructs also describe different assumptions about the entrepreneur's perception of *time*. Third, the constructs vary in their *epistemological emphasis* on objective versus subjective elements of the entrepreneurial experience. Finally, the constructs vary in terms of their implicit *levels of analysis*.

### 8.1. Environment

The papers that present entrepreneurial opportunity as the result of the reflexivity of entrepreneurs also adopt a much more *permeable* and *malleable* description of the environment within which entrepreneurs are embedded. That is, the external environment, for those studies that emphasized reflexivity, is perceived by those scholars to be less concrete and inflexible and more amenable to being reconstructed, than the description of the environment offered by those studies that emphasized imprinting. For the latter group of studies, not only is the external environment perceived to be more concrete and unchanging, but the barrier between the entrepreneur and the environment is much more distinct.

So, for example, in the Mathias et al., *in press* paper broadly defines the external environment to include people, experiences, technology and related formative interactions between individual entrepreneurs and their external environment. The study suggests that these various elements that constitute the external environment of the entrepreneur are somehow “harder” or more concrete than is the entrepreneur. These elements of the external environment inscribe themselves on the entrepreneur and, in some cases, create ideal conditions within which the entrepreneur can discover and exploit opportunities.

Significantly, the construct of imprinting not only carries an explicit assumption of a “hard” external environment, but it also contains an implicit assumption of a “soft” or malleable entrepreneur who is not merely influenced by the experience, but also is permanently shaped by it. This view of the entrepreneur is in sharp contrast to the environment–entrepreneur interaction described by Singh et al., *in press* in which the environment inflicts a powerful and negative influence on the entrepreneur, but through processes of reflection, some of the entrepreneurs learn and adapt as a result of that experience.

One clear conclusion from this point of distinction however is the proposition that *the discovery thesis of entrepreneurial opportunity contains an inherent assumption that the external environment is both distinct from and more agentic than the entrepreneur*. By contrast, in the *creation thesis, the boundary between entrepreneur and environment is less distinct and the degree of agency between entrepreneur and environment is more evenly distributed*.

### 8.2. Time

The papers that acknowledge imprinting has a prominent role in shaping entrepreneurial discovery also seem to adopt a notion of time that is more linear, objective and path dependent. That is, they all share an understanding that an entrepreneur's ability to recognize opportunities in the external environment occur as a result of critical incidents that occur early on the entrepreneur's experience and then exert an increasingly profound influence (either positive or negative) over time.

This influence is evident in both the Breugst et al., *in press* paper and the Mathias et al., *in press* paper which point to critical incidents in the early lived experience of their entrepreneurs that continue to manifest themselves in an enduring way throughout the life history of the entrepreneur. Jaskiewicz et al., *in press* also describe the importance of critical incidents in shaping entrepreneurs ability to realize upon opportunity. However, they offer a somewhat more nuanced perspective in which the entrepreneurial family internalizes and recreates the effect of these critical incidents over multiple generations. MacKeever et al., *in press* adopt a similar long-term view in which the critical incidents are the result of the entrepreneurs' long-term interaction with the local community that sensitizes them to potential long-run opportunities.

All of these papers characterize time as an objective and enduring influence. Moreover, they adopt a path-dependent view of time in which some early stage incidents play an important role in both delimiting opportunity and agency or, alternatively, creating unique sensitivities of perception within the entrepreneur that enables them to see opportunity when and where others cannot.

By contrast, the papers in which entrepreneurial opportunity emerges from the reflexive capabilities of the entrepreneur do not seem to give much credence to critical incidents. Nor do they characterize time in such a linear, determinative fashion. Rather, the effects of time on the entrepreneur emerge iteratively, with a recurring dialogue between the entrepreneur and the environment in which both actors change and adapt in relation to each other. So, for example, Singh et al., *in press* demonstrate how some entrepreneurs can overcome the stigma of critical incidents through reflection, internalization and learning. Similarly, Jennings et al., *in press* describe how the interactions between yacht owners, shipyards, and designers iterate and change over time. Rather than identifying a single critical incident in the entrepreneurial process, the authors demonstrate a process of collective learning that occurs across a series of small, but ongoing interactions.

So another proposition that we can draw from our studies is that the discovery thesis of entrepreneurial opportunity contains within it a distinct set of assumptions about the role and influence of time. In these studies time is seen as having an *isolated episodic*

influence that creates path dependency in which critical incidents bear enduring effect that constrains or enables the ability to identify opportunity. From the creation perspective, by contrast, time is iterative, rather than a determinative influence, in which the entrepreneur's ongoing interaction with the environment creates mutual and simultaneous changes in both the entrepreneur and the environment that, over time, constructs opportunity.

### 8.3. Epistemological emphasis

A third distinction between the constructs is the degree to which each adopts epistemological positions that embrace either objectivity or subjectivity in describing the process of entrepreneurship. The primary emphasis in imprinting is the objective elements of opportunity recognition. So, for example, each of the studies that emphasize imprinting draw on concrete and measurable elements of the external environment as determinative of the entrepreneurial experience. These objective elements include the distribution of rewards and incentives (Breugst et al., in press), the reproduction of past entrepreneurial success (Jaskiewicz et al., in press), and the length and depth of community connections (MacKeever et al., in press).

In comparison, the studies that draw more from the role of reflexivity tend to describe subjective elements of creating opportunity. Thus, a clear emphasis in the Jennings et al., in press paper is the role of emotion in the dynamic interactions between key agents in the super yacht industry. The authors conclude that emotion plays a powerful role in creating the space for innovation. Singh et al., in press, similarly observe a critical cathartic role of emotion in the reflective processes by which failed entrepreneurs work through their perceptions of entrepreneurial failure. Similarly the Waldron et al., in press study shows that RAN engaged in substantive institutional work that effectively created an alternate or new reality within which it was recognized as a pivotal actor in the retail lumber industry.

A third proposition that we draw from the articles, thus, is the observation that entrepreneurial imprinting focuses our attention on *concrete practices and objective experiences* that are highly influential in explaining why and how individual differences in the ability to recognize entrepreneurial opportunity arise. The clear emphasis is on practices and behaviors rather than perceptions and interpretations of those practices and behaviors. By contrast, the construct of entrepreneurial reflexivity draws our attention to the *subjective and interpretive inner world* of the entrepreneur as a key mechanism by which entrepreneurs can elevate their imagination beyond the institutionalized constraints of the existing environment and conceive of alternative social, economic and political arrangements.

### 8.4. Levels of analysis

The studies that emphasize the importance of imprinting as a key element of opportunity discovery tend to focus on lower levels of analysis. Two of the studies (Breugst et al., in press and Mathias et al., in press) focus on individuals and groups. One (MacKeever et al.) examines individual entrepreneurs in community contexts and one (Jaskiewicz et al., in press) adopts the family as their primary unit of analysis.

In comparison, those studies that identify reflexivity as a key component of opportunity creation tend to operate at more macro levels of analysis. Four papers (Alvarez et al., forthcoming; Jennings et al., in press; Marion et al., in press, and Waldron et al., in press) focus on industry level activities, although they include individuals or individual organizations in their analyses. The clear emphasis, however, is on industry or institutional level entrepreneurship. Only one paper (Singh et al., in press) adopts the individual entrepreneur as the primary level of analysis.

The demonstrated differences in levels of analysis between these two constructs suggests the possibility that, rather than being in opposition to each other, the constructs of reflexivity and imprinting simply reflect differences in the observational perspective of the researcher. That is, researchers who focus on micro-level approaches to entrepreneurship, at the level of the group or the individual, are somewhat pre-disposed to focusing on somewhat objective and deterministic elements of the entrepreneurial process. In other words, looking “up” from the point of view of the individual or the team, the external world appears to be much more objective, powerful and agentic.

However, when viewed from the top down, i.e., when taking the perspective of the industry or the organizational field, the researcher sees a much more malleable and intersubjectively dynamic view of entrepreneurship where the boundary between individuals, teams, or firms and their environments are much less distinct. This observation suggests that the alternative positions taken in the literature, i.e., that discovery and creation, or imprinting and reflexivity, are not in opposition to each other but rather exist in a somewhat orthogonal yet mutually supportive relationship to each other. That is these relationships are viewed in opposition to each other is largely the result of the observational position of the researcher in the field. In the next and final section of this essay, we explore the implications of these preliminary propositions based on our analysis and theoretical understanding of entrepreneurial opportunity developed here.

## 9. Conclusion

Our analysis of the nine outstanding papers that comprise this special issue of the *Journal of Business Venturing* offers insight into the emerging debate about the origins of entrepreneurial opportunity. We identify imprinting and reflexivity as key mechanisms and core constructs that underpin the larger tensions that question whether entrepreneurs discover opportunity or create it. That is, theorists who advocate a discovery perspective see imprinting as a key process that explains how some entrepreneurs are more likely than others to “discover” an opportunity. Reciprocally, theorists who advocate a creation perspective see reflexivity as a core construct that explains how some actors are better able to “create” entrepreneurial opportunity.

However, rather than merely reflecting the tension that exists between objectivists and social constructionists in entrepreneurial theory, the constructs of reflexivity and imprinting also point to areas of agreement or similarity between the tensions. Reflexivity and imprinting both share common assumptions about human cognition. Both views, for example, draw attention to the key importance of socially shared cognition as a foundational component of entrepreneurial opportunity. That is, both imprinting and reflexivity share a common assumption that entrepreneurial opportunity emerges as the result of a capacity of some actors (individuals or organizations) to perceive socially embedded schemas in unique and creative ways (although they may differ in their assumptions about how those socially embedded schemas arose).

This suggests that fruitful opportunities for future research might emerge by examining, both empirically and conceptually, the various ways in which shared schemas or socially shared cognitions are created and diffused and how it is that some actors are able to overcome them. Understanding the dynamics of effective entrepreneurship, thus, might rest on a more nuanced blending of both reflexivity and imprinting in which the constructs are not seen as oppositional, but rather representative of an orthogonal relationship between shared cognitions that become culturally embedded (i.e. imprinted) over time, but which are periodically overcome by actors who are less susceptible to the totalizing effect of imprinted cognitions (i.e. reflexivity).

Our view of entrepreneurial opportunity raises many questions. How do culturally held cognitions become embedded? How is it that some actors are better able than others to see past such totalizing schema? The research studies in this volume suggest an important role for network position, emotions, failure and a range of other factors that seem to be important. There are likely many more.

We can, however, agree that qualitative research methods, like the ones used in this special issue, will play an essential role in answering these questions. Because qualitative researchers ask broad, open-ended questions and remain intimately connected with the phenomenon of study, qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to generate new insights and to build new theory. Because it relies largely on inductive reasoning, qualitative research is more likely to identify new conceptual categories and new theoretical constructs. For these reasons, if we, as entrepreneurship researchers are going to build an indigenous theory of our object of study, we must embrace and encourage much more qualitative research. We see this volume of outstanding studies as signaling the first step in this direction and will encourage a rich dawn of new qualitative research in entrepreneurship.

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