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The joys and pitfalls of writing interesting research

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We, too, are not only producers but consumers of theories; and we have to consume other people's theories, and sometimes perhaps our own, if we are to go on producing. 'To consume' means here, first of all, 'to digest', as in the case of the bees. But it means more: our consumption of theories, whether those produced by other people or by ourselves, also means criticising them, changing them, and often even demolishing them, in order to replace them by better ones. All these are operations which are necessary for the growth of our knowledge. (Popper 2012, 2)

Writing and knitting are invisible sisters, text and texture deriving from the same Latin word *texere* ('to weave'). The organic metaphor of knitting is often used to depict how new texts come to life by engaging in ongoing and generative discussion, debate and controversy with past and parallel texts. Research texts are not any different in this regard: they are also products of a serendipitous act of knitting together past and novel ideas within the fabric of knowledge.

In this editorial, we address the issue of writing interesting research by looking at research production as a social, embodied activity oriented as much to enabling scientific discovery as to securing knowledge conservation. Why should we care about how research texts come to life and how this helps us to write more interesting research? Simply because, although (self-)awareness does not change research production practices at a field level, it can change our own ways of engaging with thinking and writing and thus our own ability to boldly and responsibly navigate the joys and pitfalls of writing interesting research.

Knowledge (re)production of exosomatic artefacts

According to the well-known British philosopher Karl Popper (2012), our reality is made of three interacting worlds, realms or levels within the known universe, which he called World 1, World 2 and World 3. World 1 comprises the natural world of biological and physical–chemical states and processes studied by natural sciences. World 2 refers to the human beings' mental states and processes, such as our thoughts and feelings. World 3 consists of the products of our mind, considered as 'objects' in their own right, such as ideas, theories, texts, scientific discoveries, art and religion. In Karl Popper's terms (Popper 2012, 2), these 'exosomatic artefacts' are probably what makes us most human: their daily production and consumption being a fundamental part of our lives and the very origin and fabric of our scientific knowledge. Because our theories – our ideas and explanations about the world we live in – are of our own making, they are open to be challenged, questioned and replaced by other better or more refined ideas.

Because human beings live simultaneously in these three worlds, it is very difficult for anyone to detach oneself from the extant knowledge stored in World 3 because the artefacts of World 3 are 'organs evolving outside our skins' (Popper 2012, 2). Any effort at challenging them may potentially produce physical and psychological sufferings, notwithstanding social exile. Indeed, the production

and consumption of knowledge in our daily lives are not a purely neutral cognitive process but rather a social activity biased towards safeguarding and maintaining World 3 as it is, without further questioning.

Going beyond this natural bias towards knowledge preservation, scientific knowledge leverages the *critique* of extant knowledge (Popper 1962), with scientists engaging in a permanent process of critique ('refutation') of current ideas and theories ('conjectures') to formulate new answers, which will be further subjected to a similar endeavour. However, criticizing extant knowledge is only the first step of producing scientific knowledge. To generate new knowledge, an additional step is necessary, that of discovering new problems and asking new questions. Indeed, old theories are often attempts to solve old problems, some of which might still exist whilst others may have disappeared or lost their relevance over the years. We should therefore be ready to do more to advance our knowledge on entrepreneurial phenomena and boldly dare to formulate novel, even counterintuitive questions addressing emerging problems. Indeed, interesting research should not only offer good, tentative answers to already-known problems. It should also give rise to new questions and point at new problems, which might be different from the old ones, opening up space for novel ideas and theories, then for new criticisms of these ideas and theories. Our conviction is that by going through this reflective process, we may not only uniquely contribute to the collective effort of knowledge production in our field but also allow ourselves to enact our own autonomy as knowing subjects and authors.

Research production as a social, embodied activity

Embodied knowledge

World 3 is the result of the interaction between Worlds 1 and 2, a situated interaction taking place within a particular time and space, together and under the influence of others. Research production, consumption and criticizing involve researchers as embodied, social individuals. This is explicitly advocated and reflexively examined in studies taking a practice perspective on entrepreneurial phenomena (Johannisson 2011); 'a practice orientation tends towards observational field work of a particular situation over time, typically requiring an involvement of the researcher in the site where practices occur' (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020, 254). It is also the standpoint in much of the qualitative research that involves 'establishing close, even familial, relations with the participants and the sense of being there together, enabling open and authentic interactions to generate rich data' (Peura et al. 2021, 105). Thus, we are there from beginning to end.

Engaging in research within the field of entrepreneurship therefore requires a strong proximity with other researchers, as we are all travellers on a common journey. Interesting research is often the result of a strong dialogue, a compelling debate and sometimes even confrontation among several researchers, all committed to shaping together a significant contribution to a theory that extends while enhancing our knowledge and understanding. Writing, therefore, emerges through dialogue – multiple dialogues taking place before and after research production not only among the members of the research team but also with others in conferences, journals and research groups. Writing thus arises as a social activity both in its *doing* – the knowledge production activity and in its *consumption* and *criticizing* – the knowledge assimilation and evaluation. However, whilst the power of the collective enables knowledge production, consumption and criticizing, collectives are also places of power, conformity and imitation.

The risk of conformism – 'doxa'

Because research is a social activity, knowledge production, consumption and criticizing are activities enacted by professionals within a field of practice (Smith and Anderson 2007): all looking for legitimacy, embracing certain theories, entering schools of thought in attempts to build their careers

and being acknowledged as legitimate players by others. To make ourselves understandable to others – and indeed to have an audience for our ideas – we may be tempted to conform to or even mimic existing ideas, embracing taken-for-granted ideas and theories.

To believe that our research field is shaped exclusively by our genuine curiosity would therefore be extremely naive. Entrepreneurship faculty is predominantly located at business schools, which are dependent on the accreditation systems as well as on the broader university rankings. As one of the newest disciplines within management, the scholarly community of entrepreneurship has also worked hard to establish a stronger academic legitimacy of the field, which has influenced our publishing endeavours and impacted the research conducted in our field (Harirchi and Landström 2021).

Entrepreneurship research has gradually become aware of the narrowness of the legitimate knowledge-building within our domain. Much of our theorizing derives from researching the ‘exceptional’ cases – high-growth ‘gazelles’ and ‘unicorns’ rather than the mundane forms of entrepreneurship. However, these exceptional entrepreneurial forms are extremely rare. Recently, the need to better understand the majority – everyday entrepreneurs in contexts – has been acknowledged (Welter et al. 2017; Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2021), including those in the margins, such as the barefoot entrepreneurs (Imas, Wilson, and Weston 2012) or refugee entrepreneurs (Refai, Haloub, and Lever 2018). It could be that the individuals in the margins have a greater need for entrepreneurship and perhaps even ‘a more intrinsic conception with the [entrepreneurial] process’ (Dodd, Anderson, and Jack 2021, 10). Thus, the field seems to be ready to embrace a more diverse and inclusive understanding of what counts as legitimate for entrepreneurship research. Will we be courageous enough to take this opportunity and explore new paths, challenging our current ways of seeing, feeling and understanding entrepreneurship? Will we be courageous enough to write about entrepreneurial phenomena in new ways?

Although well-known, senior researchers with tenure arguably are in a better position to challenge taken-for-granted ideas, even they are not immune to the institutional and international isomorphism (Harirchi and Landström 2021). As an example, William Bygrave acknowledges his own failure to challenge the conventions:

Since 1989, I have produced about 30 qualitative teaching case studies, most of them about high-potential entrepreneurs, but I have lacked the courage to write a qualitative research case because I know that the odds of getting one published in a leading journal are very slim. (Bygrave 2007, 27)

As a solution, he invites journal editors and their review boards to become less narrow-minded and much more pluralistic. At Entrepreneurship & Regional Development (ERD), we embrace this invitation.

Looking for interesting, thought-provoking research

In his inspiring article ‘That’s Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology’, Davis (1971) implicitly takes a Popperian perspective on knowledge production and consumption, arguing that ‘interesting theories are those which deny certain assumptions of their audience’ while non-interesting research ‘affirms’ already held assumptions. For Davis (1971), writing interesting research requires challenging what we routinely take for granted as knowledge producers and consumers to offer novel and inspiring understanding for both scholars and practitioners.

‘Interestingness’ has also been discussed within the entrepreneurship research domain, where our tendency to emphasize relevance for stakeholders has influenced us to choose new topics based on their being important for society (Landström and Harirchi 2019). Thus, topics like high-growth companies have received considerably more attention as ‘interesting topics’ than their proportion in the business population would indicate. Harirchi and Landström (2021) observe that there are some differences in what is considered ‘interesting’ between scholars from different regions (e.g.

Europeans placing more emphasis on novelty in methodological approaches, while their North American colleagues value methodological robustness). Despite these regional differences, international isomorphism is evident by our strong convergence around what we all perceive as 'interesting' in the field. This similarity of knowledge, research themes and methods across regions is somewhat surprising given the growing attention paid to the importance of context in entrepreneurship research (Welter et al. 2017). It would seem logical that contextual heterogeneity should be visible in the differences in research traditions between regions and countries, including the topics and themes studied.

Harirchi and Landström (2021) acknowledge the importance of having a variety of scientific journals with a range of norms and standards in order to create room for scholars with an explicit contextual focus. Thus, the journals need to resist the institutional pressures of becoming alike with similar (and increasing) expectations. ERD has set the goal to do this by publishing interesting, courageous, thought-provoking and robust papers. We are aware that engaging in the production of novel ideas and theories requires both courage and rigour, as we acknowledge the importance of ensuring particular supporting conditions for producing and disseminating interesting research. We believe that producing interesting research not only requires the cultivation of unique, *individual virtues*, such as courage, honesty, authenticity and transparency, but also the creation of unique *communities of practice* that can encourage the discussion and confrontation of thought-provoking ideas. We all need communities to help us to be brave and to have the courage to dare to go further in our discovery process.

ERD aims to be a supporting and stimulating community of practice, honouring and challenging the entrepreneurship research legacy.

Concluding thoughts

In line with our knitting metaphor, a published paper is a Norwegian pullover with a pattern rich in intricate details comprising a beautiful whole. A submitted paper does not yet live up to this metaphor. While all submissions are required to be complete (and not just random patches of knitting joined together), it is here when the editors and reviewers step in as co-creators of knowledge, working with you to re-craft the pattern, refine the texture, identify the right depth of colour and define the boundaries of your knitting. At ERD, we will help you to knit your paper together and craft it to reach its final shape; you are welcome to express your ideas through a unique, knitted artefact that others will unravel (or you will unravel it in further studies); this is how research is done – as ongoing, intertwined practices of knowing and relating in the three Worlds altogether. Join us in what we believe is a meaningful and joyful journey in building the field of entrepreneurship.

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