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IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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# **APPLYING PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP INQUIRY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

## **Abstract**

We apply philosophical perspectives to five representative dimensions of entrepreneurship research suggested by Shane (2012) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000) to assess the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry and to consider implications for future research. We observe the dominance of an objectivist perspective across the five dimensions, whereby particular variables associated with the object, i.e. entrepreneur or firm, are studied. However, we suggest that the phenomenology perspective, whereby perceptions and interpretations derive meaning from their social context, is more appropriate in dimensions such as entrepreneurial opportunity identification or entrepreneurial choice. Our analysis suggests that the field should continue to aspire to a unity of agreement over distinctive dimensions of entrepreneurship research, as the challenge remains to present a scholarly field with an externally acknowledged tradition of inquiry.

## **1 Introduction**

Although entrepreneurship as a field of study has seen significant development in recent years, there remains considerable debate over its distinctiveness. In their seminal paper, “The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Study,” Shane and Venkataraman (2000) state that entrepreneurship would not become a legitimate scholarly field until it offered a theoretical framework to explain and predict phenomena neither explained nor predicted by other fields. Similarly, Busenitz et al (2003) suggest that an academic field such as entrepreneurship must establish its own ontological (examined reality and being) and epistemological (the relationship between that reality and the researcher) base; requiring researchers to create new knowledge, refine new understandings and develop new theories that are distinctive from other domains.

Other scholars, such as Davidsson (2005) have questioned whether a distinctive domain for entrepreneurship is possible, given the influence of and overlap with other disciplines. One of the identified strengths of entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry is the breadth of theoretical propositions and diversity of disciplinary anchors which underpin its research. Entrepreneurship scholars are not confined to a narrow theoretical paradigm or reliance on

one theoretical perspective, which can lead to inherent methods bias and the domination of theory testing rather than theory generation (Deshpande, 1983).

While the debate continues over whether or not a distinctive domain or separate scholarly field exists, it can be argued that most entrepreneurship researchers are more concerned with the “what, why and how” questions that reflect their particular lines of inquiry and research interests. In the preface to his book “Researching Entrepreneurship,” Davidsson (2005: xiii) states: *“You will not find a lot of philosophy of science arguments or references in this book...philosophers of science often do not know much about conducting empirical research - they simply don’t have that experience and expertise...”* Seymour (2006) points out that such dismissals of philosophy are not uncommon across different fields of business research, given that little attention has been paid to establishing relevance and significance of philosophies of science for business scholars.

Hughes and Sharrock (1997) suggest that the debate over ontology and epistemology is irrelevant in social science research, as researchers worry about the problems they confront from their investigations and theories and will deploy methods appropriate to dealing with those problems. A fundamental assumption here is that researchers match their methods with their research problems, and as such, implicitly or explicitly understand ontology and epistemology in order to apply the most appropriate research methods (e.g. Seymour, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

We suggest that such assumptions and dismissals of philosophy deflect the distinctiveness debate highlighted by leading scholars in the field (e.g. Shane, 2012) and ignore the need to critically examine the underlying philosophical foundation of current research. Prasad (2005: 8) states: *“For methods to prove insightful... more than knowledge of technique is required. Methods themselves are linked to larger paradigmatic issues and are often appropriated in diverse ways within the same and different paradigms.”*

While entrepreneurship researchers may draw upon a breadth of theoretical propositions and diversity of disciplinary anchors, entrepreneurship as an academic field of inquiry remains challenged to establish distinctive ontological and epistemological roots (Shane, 2012). Connell and Nord (1996) suggest that debates on ontology and epistemology cannot end in any philosophical solution, given that there is no right or wrong philosophical stance.

However, there has been little debate on philosophical perspectives as they may apply to a multi-level phenomenon such as entrepreneurship, which encompasses individual, group, firm, population and trans-population levels of analysis (Shane, 2012; Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). More broadly, debate continues over the interpretative role of the researcher and the level of pre-understanding of researchers in using multiple explanatory propositions (Sarantakos, 1993) and over how to objectively reduce lived experiences of entrepreneurs using rigorous empirical methods (Berglund, 2007).

Much of the research and theory development in the entrepreneurship field favours large studies and positivist epistemology based on meta-theoretical assumptions (Grant and Perren, 2002). While it is acknowledged that positivist research paradigms have been successful in progressing the field (Seymour, 2007, Davidsson, 2005), other scholars are clear on its limitations.

Chandler and Lyon (2001) suggest that the “liveliness” of entrepreneurship tends to be suspended in favour of scientific rigour of the positivist paradigm. Similarly, Phan (2004: 619) calls for more diverse methods from entrepreneurship researchers, claiming that “*to develop a catechism founded on positivist empiricism may hide the very grail we seek.*” A number of scholars identify the lack of ethnographic or phenomenological studies in a field that is by definition concerned with human behaviour (Styles and Seymour, 2006; Jones and Coviello, 2005). Berglund (2007) identifies a growing interest among entrepreneurship scholars to expand the methodological toolbox and widen the scope of inquiry.

This paper contributes to the debate over the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry by examining entrepreneurship research in the context of relevant philosophical perspectives. The approach used in the paper is to apply a philosophical perspective to five distinctive dimensions of current entrepreneurship research suggested by Shane (2012) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000). We choose these dimensions for two reasons: first, the original article has had a significant impact on the field (e.g. Academy of Management Review Decade Award); and second, the recent article (Shane, 2012) has specifically addressed the issue of distinctiveness in updating original perspectives from the earlier paper.

The paper proceeds as follows. We examine distinctive dimensions of entrepreneurship (Shane, 2012; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) to establish the nature of empirical inquiry in each dimension, to consider currently applied research methods and to suggest relevant philosophical issues. We then draw upon this analysis to discuss particular philosophical perspectives that relate to existing research methods and practices. Lastly, we summarise our discussion to provide insights that contribute to the debate on the distinctive nature of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field and offer considerations for future research.

## **2 Dimensions of Entrepreneurship Research**

In reflecting on criticisms over the definition of entrepreneurship presented in their paper “The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Study,” (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), Shane (2012) suggests that entrepreneurship can be defined by everything that shares the dimensions that researchers consider unique to the field and to exclude everything that does not share these common dimensions.

Shane identifies five distinctive dimensions of empirical study unique to entrepreneurship: 1) entrepreneurship examines how identification of opportunities affects societal wealth and individual happiness (beyond simply business performance); 2) entrepreneurship focuses on individual or group choices relative to other alternatives; 3) entrepreneurship focuses on efforts to exploit opportunities using new means-end relationships; 4) entrepreneurship does not require taking the firm as unit of analysis (i.e. exists in settings in which firms do not exist); and 5) entrepreneurship moves beyond “strategic” activities to consider entrepreneurial process that includes resource assembly, establishment of legal entities in addition to firm creation and organisation.

In considering each of the five dimensions, we identify literature that reflects the nature of empirical inquiry in each dimension and present relevant philosophical issues that such inquiry raise, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Distinctive Domains of Entrepreneurship**  
(Shane, 2012; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000)

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Nature of Empirical Study</b>	<b>Philosophical Issues</b>
<b>Opportunity Identification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Amongst most important abilities of successful entrepreneurs (Ardichvili et al, 2003)</li> <li>-Develop over time; chance of arbitrage (Kirzner, 1997); lead to supernormal profits (Shane &amp; Venkataraman, 2000)</li> <li>-Exist independently of entrepreneur; uncorrelated with attributes of discoverer (Evans &amp; Jovanovic, 1989)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Perception, interpretation of opportunity derive meaning from the social context in which they appear (Piore, 1995; Diltthey, 1989)</li> <li>-Opportunity itself should not be confused with entrepreneur's perception of it (Giorgi, 2004)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Opportunity is anchored in time, in the social market, and in the eye of the entrepreneur</li> <li>-Prioritizing opportunity as object or the entrepreneur as subject?</li> <li>-Little success in attempts to objectify the creative &amp; innovative entrepreneur (e.g. Goodman, 1994)</li> </ul>
<b>Choices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Exploratory approach to making choices (Casson, 2003)</li> <li>-Majority of entrepreneurs founding new firms are employed (Shane, 2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Decisions made in context of known conditions of resource availability, technology &amp; preferences resulting from rational choices (Rosen, 1997)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Decisions on choice &amp; recombining resources are subjective and creative (Shane, 2012)</li> <li>-Entrepreneur's view of world may be different than co-founders' views</li> </ul>
<b>Exploitation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Entrepreneur specializes in taking judgmental decisions about coordination of scarce resources" (Casson, 2003, Schumpeter, 1934)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Opportunity exploitation requires creation of new means-ends relationships vs. use of existing frameworks (Shane &amp; Venkataraman, 2000)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Discriminating between existing and new means-end relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Unit of Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New firm formation only one institutional arrangement for opportunity identification, evaluation &amp; exploitation (Shane, 2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What factors affect different organisational arrangements under which opportunities identified, evaluated &amp; exploited (Shane, 2012; Alvarez &amp; Parker, 2009; Davidsson, 2004)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-If organisational arrangements are independent of entrepreneur (e.g. resources, markets, regulations, etc.), how does this affect entrepreneurial choice?</li> </ul>
<b>Process (beyond "strategic" activities)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Entrepreneurship is a process, not as the embodiment of a type of person; comprised of different sub-processes</li> <li>-Processes investigated <i>after</i> opportunities are discovered (Shane &amp; Venkataraman, 2000)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-There may be no optimal entrepreneurial process (a number of equally effective processes exist)</li> <li>-If there is an optimal process, entrepreneurs may not approach it in the best way (Shane, 2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-How does context influence entrepreneurial process?</li> </ul>

The first dimension considered unique to the entrepreneurship field according to Shane (2012) is entrepreneurial opportunity identification. Shane suggests that there remains limited understanding of the influence of context on opportunity identification and exploitation. Shane emphasises that entrepreneurial opportunities and business ideas are different concepts: the former are situations in which it is possible to recombine resources to generate a profit; and the latter are entrepreneurs' interpretation of how to recombine resources in a way that allows pursuit of that opportunity. Shane (2012: 15) states: "*entrepreneurs' business*

*ideas are not objective...they are plans created and enacted in response to the entrepreneurs' beliefs about opportunities."*

Perception and interpretation of opportunity are suggested to derive meaning from the social context in which they appear (Piore, 1995; Diltthey, 1989). From a phenomenological perspective, the meaning that an entrepreneur attaches to things experienced or opportunities anticipated is the primary focus of inquiry vs. 'things' as normally conceived (Cope, 2005; Gartner and Birley, 2002). The term "phenomenology" refers to that which is the immediate object of experience (regardless of whether that object is real or unreal) (Husserl, 1964, 1931). If one accepts that perceptions and interpretations of entrepreneurial opportunities derive meaning from the social context in which they appear, one philosophical question relates to the issue of isolating particularly observations from their situation.

Seymour (2006) suggests that entrepreneurial opportunity is anchored in time - in the social market and in the recognizing eye of the entrepreneur. However, Evans & Jovanovic (1989) suggest that opportunities exist independently of the entrepreneur and that people recognize opportunities that are uncorrelated with attributes of the discoverer. While the researcher may alternatively prioritize the opportunity as object or the entrepreneur as subject, the vast majority of research in entrepreneurship has taken an "objectivist" perspective (Seymour, 2006; Grant and Perren, 2002) whereby particular variables associated with the object are studied.

Some scholars seek to understand the relationship between entrepreneurs and their behaviour and actions via entrepreneurial cognitions, such as Shane's person–opportunity nexus (2003), and Sarasvathy's (2001) notion of effectuation. Their theories share the view of entrepreneurs as contextually embedded human beings trying to make sense of their local and extended life worlds.

At the same time, cognitive research has been criticised for assuming relatively stable cognitive mechanisms, and other approaches have arisen that accommodate local sense-making and emergence (Gartner et al. 2003). Narrative and discursive approaches attempt to investigate and interpret entrepreneurial expressions and events in relation to emerging and pre-existing discourses, and as such derive meaning through the context of the narrative (e.g. Hjort and Steyaert 2004).

A notable challenge for researchers is to “objectively” reduce lived experiences of the entrepreneur to their pure essences to a similarly rigorous empirical methodology (e.g. Berglund, 2007). We would suggest that examining opportunity *exploitation* using the firm as object, for example, does not require the same level of deconstruction and interpretation as examining opportunity *identification* using the entrepreneur as object, as variables for the former are more amenable to measurement than the latter.

While the researcher may alternatively prioritize the opportunity as object or the entrepreneur as subject, there remains a question over the level of objectivity that entrepreneurs’ apply to opportunity identification. As Giogi (2004:4) states: “*Objectivism is a false ideal because its very stance is not faithfully descriptive of the state of affairs required to bring it about.*” This issue is discussed further below.

The second dimension, individual choice (relative to other alternatives), is characterised by research that suggests such decisions are subjective and creative (Shane, 2012), exploratory (Casson, 2003) and influenced by known conditions (i.e. resource availability, market, preferences, etc.) and rational choices (e.g. Rosen, 1997). An objectivist perspective characterises research in this dimension, including identifying situational characteristics that influence entrepreneurial choices and modes of exploitation such as access to finance (Shapero, 1984) and supporting role models (Brockhaus and Horowitz, 1986).

If one accepts that individual or collective choice (i.e. entrepreneur or founding team) also derives meaning from the situational and social context in which it appears, then another philosophical issue relates to a potential “tension” between subjective and objective or rational accounts of choice. For example, the motives behind an entrepreneur’s choice can be understood only by understanding the context, and “appreciation of [an action’s] ‘deeper significance’ are to be distinguished from its causal explanation in terms either of efficient or final causes.” (Sarantakos, 1993:16). It is necessary, with this logic, to understand the situation in which these choices or intentions make sense, in an attempt to attribute motives through an understanding of the context.

In constructing the evidence to consider entrepreneurial choice, the researcher must account for a social and physical context which can be highly situated and improvisational, such as in the presence of *bricolage* where the entrepreneur demonstrates the ability to “*make do with*



*whatever is to hand*” (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 17) or where understanding is constructed within and distributed throughout an entrepreneurial team (Brown and Duguid, 1991); in other words, the individual entrepreneur’s view of the world may be different than a shared understanding of that world when examining co-founders’ views.

The third dimension, opportunity exploitation, recognises entrepreneurs’ judgmental decisions about coordination of scarce resources (Casson, 2003, Schumpeter, 1934). Debate remains over whether or not use of existing (vs. new) means-end relationships in exploiting opportunity represents ‘entrepreneurship’ (Shane, 2012; Foss and Klein, 2008; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Shane (2012:18) argues that entrepreneurs do more than arbitrage (i.e. buying resources at one time or place and selling them at another) by introducing a level of innovation to their exploitation process that differentiates the means-end relationship from others.

This calls into question whether entrepreneurial opportunity exploitation (and opportunity identification) should be distinguished by the presence of ‘notable’ newness, novelty and creativity, rather than inclusive of the moderately incremental and improved or imitative? (e.g. Seymour, 2006; Lester & Piore, 2004; Swedberg, 2000; Amit et al, 1993).

From an epistemological perspective, the challenge of discriminating between existing vs. new opportunities and combinations of resources, when they appear, assumes that the researcher can recognise such distinction. Furthermore, the validity of predictive or causal power from such observations may be questionable, given that their specific nature cannot be predicted by knowledge of their antecedents (e.g. Rothenberg and Hausman, 1976) unless the social and situational context from which new means-end relationships arose is considered.

The fourth dimension, unit of analysis (i.e. firm or other organisational arrangements where opportunities are identified, evaluated and exploited) has attracted significant interest from entrepreneurship researchers, with the firm as the central focus of empirical inquiry. There is recognition that entrepreneurship as a scholarly field can be distinguished from strategic management by its interest in different organisational arrangements under which opportunities identified, evaluated & exploited (Shane, 2012; Alvarez & Parker, 2009; Davidsson, 2004).

Objectivist perspectives are also evident in theories and frameworks used to study the firm, such as the resource-based view of the firm (Penrose, 1959, 1980) and five-forces framework (Porter, 1980) amongst others. The complexity of the business context - within which the entrepreneur resides and where new organisational arrangements may develop - is characterised by continual change in practice of business, producing a complicated and challenging context for the researcher in which previous theories or explanations may no longer apply. From a philosophical perspective, this suggests that prior research be critically scrutinized to assess its validity in informing future research given a social context that is ever-changing and rarely static (Gummesson, 1989). In other words, theories of the firm may not be directly applicable to other organisational arrangements.

Further, the firm, or other organisational arrangement, is likely to reflect a multitude of interrelationships of social activity. This suggests that multiple perceptions of the people comprising the organisational arrangement be assessed by the researcher to establish a social reality that accurately reflects this aggregate of interrelationships and activity. Reality in this sense is complex, multi-faceted, and diverse, containing personal perceptions and actions that are expressions of a correct or a false consciousness. From this point of view, reality can be hidden behind appearances (Sarantakos, 1993).

The fifth and final dimension considered unique to the entrepreneurship field by Shane (2012) is entrepreneurial process. Shane & Venkataraman (2000) argue that entrepreneurship is a process, not the embodiment of a type of person and is comprised of different sub-processes which are generally investigated *after* opportunities are discovered. In responding to criticisms from other scholars to their earlier paper (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), Shane (2012:14) clarifies that entrepreneurial process may not necessarily be rational, planned, strategic or temporally ordered (e.g. identification, evaluation, exploitation). Shane further suggests that there may be no optimal entrepreneurial process, but rather that a number of equally effective processes exist - or if there is an optimal process, entrepreneurs may not approach it in the best way.

From a philosophical perspective, if it is accepted that a distinctive entrepreneurial process exists and is comprised of recognised sub-processes, then ontologically, meaning will be derived from observing all the sub-processes in context and the interrelationships that

formulate the sub-parts into the whole, allowing for a holistic view of the process. This recognises that the whole is not identical to the sum of its parts (Gummesson, 1991).

If there is uncertainty within the scholarly field that a distinctive entrepreneurial process exists or is coherent, then the researcher has no way of knowing whether its inconsistency - when examining its sub-parts for example - is the fault of one's research methods, interpretation or understanding of it or whether it suggests that such a coherent process does not exist.

Further, consideration of findings from research that examines sub-processes separately may require interpretative flexibility by researchers in seeking meaning of the holistic process. Empirically, case studies may identify and capture the particular and unique ways that the process functions; however, case results may not be generalizable in the statistical sense.

The next section discusses philosophical perspectives that relate to the five dimensions and considers further implications for existing research methods and practices.

### **3 Philosophical Perspectives**

Before discussing observations on the five dimensions of entrepreneurship, it is relevant to consider more general insights on philosophy and research that provide a context for such discussion. Selection of an appropriate research methodology can be considered an iterative process, where decisions made at an ontological level inform the researcher's epistemological stance while creating the relevant research context (Cope, 2005; Easton, 1995). Methodology is described here as the theoretical analysis of the techniques used by a researcher to discover reality (Seymour, 2006) and the actual process by which these techniques are deployed to collect and analyze data (Noorderhaven, 2004).

We should acknowledge the generally accepted view that methodological issues may arise because research is inherently value-laden, inevitably influencing the choice of phenomenon and context, choice of method, choice of data, choice of findings, and the form of expression (Carson et al., 2001; Hirschman, 1986). John Hughes, in his book, "The Philosophy of Social Research", states that *"every research tool or procedure is inextricably embedded in commitments to particular visions of the world and to knowing that world"* (Hughes 1990: 23).

From an ontological perspective, the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a field of empirical inquiry can be considered in the conduct of its research. We suggest that entrepreneurship researchers deploy various methods to overcome the challenge of “epistemology of possession” (Cook & Brown, 1999) whereby information and knowledge is something that entrepreneurs possess and must therefore be extracted; and the challenge of “epistemology of knowing” (Cohen, 2007) whereby knowledge is a capacity to perform or act in particular circumstances, resulting in a large body of research focused on new firm formation (Shane, 2012). We had suggested earlier that “knowing” is not a static embedded capability but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as entrepreneurs engage the world of business practice (e.g. Orlikowski, 2002).

Within the field, the researcher’s privileged access to meaning lies not so much in measures and statistics but in the capacity to understand and find meaning in entrepreneurs’ experiences and narratives (von Eckartsberg 1986). When gathering data it is important to be flexible enough to accommodate the richness inherent in the experiences of the participants while staying focused on the particular research question and the phenomenon to be explored (Berglund and Hellström 2002).

In reflecting on the five distinctive dimensions of empirical study unique to entrepreneurship as suggested by Shane (2012), a number of specific insights can be suggested. First, an “objectivist” perspective is commonly applied to research within these dimensions, whereby particular variables associated with the object (i.e. entrepreneur or firm) are studied. Within an objectivist paradigm, a common approach for researchers is to attempt to decompose reality into discrete units that can then be evaluated and measured, then examined for high-order relations among the units that will produce findings that can be generalised.

When considering entrepreneurial opportunity identification and exploitation, however, constructs such as novelty and creativity may not be amenable to this more positivistic approach, for such an approach seeks a rational explanation based on repeated patterns of observations (Hausman, 1964). For example, the use of semi- to non-structured interviews may be more appropriate in allowing researchers to follow respondents’ leads into novel and unexpected areas.

Second, we observe the relevance of a “phenomenology” perspective, whereby perceptions and interpretations of entrepreneurial opportunity and choice derive meaning from the social context in which they appear. A phenomenological approach focuses on the more immediate, contextual perceptions and interpretations of entrepreneurs. However, Schütz (1982: 70) cautions that a key methodological challenge is that phenomenological research “*is always in conflict with its material, which is beyond language and concept.*”

This suggests that researchers must be competent interpreters and have the capability to position subjective experiences appropriately within the wider research question or line of inquiry. Researcher interpretations have the potential to go beyond what the researcher’s original, unreflective understanding revealed, and beyond what a respondent reported they were doing (Seymour, 2006). Thus, interpretations can avoid the trap of subjectivism that result from building explanation entirely upon agents’ own accounts of their actions. As von Hermann (1986:177) suggests: “*Interpretation does not shape the understanding; rather, as appropriation, interpretation emerges from that primary understanding which takes shape in projection.*”

The importance of interpretation is not confined to phenomenological or qualitative research approaches, as most positivist or quantitative methods involve at least as much interpretation. This includes, for example, defining the phenomenon to be investigated, reducing variables to be studied, choice of indicators to be used, sampling methods, research interpretation of findings, etc. Even within the positivist paradigm, previous research should be assessed by the researcher with a conscious sensitivity to personal fore-meanings and prejudices, thus allowing for sensitivity and openness to assess and interpret findings for its “newness” (Sarantakos, 1993:109).

Third, we identify the complexity of the business context within which the entrepreneur resides and where new organisational arrangements may develop. The concern here is that reliance on previous propositions and relationships that no longer provide explanatory power could weaken the conceptual foundation for new research, by underestimating the influence of a dynamic complexity inherent in the research context. Research validity is likely to be compromised when data is gathered through colloquial communication instead of controlled observation; thus, theoretical concepts can no longer be operationalized within the framework for empirical measurement.

Fourth, we identify within Shane's (2012) fifth dimension an empirical challenge arising from observation of entrepreneurial process or interpretation of sub-processes that relate to a higher order process. Here, we suggest that researchers have an adequate pre-understanding of a "defined" or "predicted" entrepreneurial process which guides the questions formulated, with the particular research paradigm providing a framework and normative limit to the free range of interpretation. While it can be suggested that the researcher grant normative authority to the object and apply this normative authority so that it makes sense for the research context, the researcher must also be open to other interpretations and explanations.

#### **4 Conclusion**

This purpose of this paper was to apply philosophical perspectives to five representative dimensions of entrepreneurship research suggested by Shane (2012) and Shane and Venkataraman (2000) to consider the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry and to consider implications for research in the field. We offer a number of contributions below.

From an ontological perspective, our analysis suggests that entrepreneurship is in one sense a "form of art", given the nexus of unique individuals choosing and pursuing different opportunities, its evolving form of practice (i.e. different organisational arrangements; dynamic business environment) and the need for researchers to be sensitive to context and the subjective-objective paradigm that should be accommodated in studying and interpreting the phenomenon across its five dimensions.

From an epistemological perspective, we identify various methods that researchers deploy to overcome the challenge of information and knowledge capture (e.g. epistemology of possession; of knowing) from what is often a primary data source – the entrepreneur. We suggest the need to clarify distinctions between subject and object as it relates to the study of entrepreneurship opportunity identification and exploitation. We suggest that a key challenge for researchers is to "objectively" reduce experiences of the entrepreneur to rigorous empirical methodology, and suggest that some lines of empirical inquiry are more appropriate for phenomenological approaches, where contextualised meaning is critical to understanding the phenomena (e.g. Berglund, 2007).

We identify the epistemological challenge of rationalising entrepreneurial choice and suggest that situational and contextual analysis of motives when confronted by choice is perhaps a more fruitful direction for future research than simply attempting to establish causal (i.e. efficient or final) explanations. We suggest that the epistemological challenge of discriminating between existing vs. new opportunities and combinations of resources (i.e. means-end relationships) in opportunity exploitation is also a fruitful area for future research, but will require further development of measurement and scale procedures and validity testing.

We suggest that more attention should be paid to research validity when examining the business context within which the entrepreneur resides and where new organisational arrangements develop. Reliance on previous propositions and relationships that no longer provide explanatory power could weaken the conceptual and theoretical foundation for new research. We also identify an empirical challenge in studying entrepreneurial process holistically or interpreting its sub-processes and identify the need for the field to establish a recognised definition of the process.

Finally, in observing the ontological debate that continues over the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry, we suggest that the field should aspire to a unity of agreement over distinctive dimensions, as suggested by Shane (2012). The challenge remains to present a scholarly field with an externally acknowledged tradition that also informs more credibly conventional entrepreneurship practice and entrepreneurship education.

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