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Entrepreneurship as collective action: The next frontier

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Abstract

Collective action in entrepreneurship is lacking in the extant literature. Despite entrepreneurship research progressively moves away from the focus of a lone heroic entrepreneur, scholars have yet to absorb the full potential of entrepreneurship as collective action. Also missing is a collective stance on key entrepreneurship concepts such as opportunity discovery or construction and entrepreneurial agency. Accordingly, this article reviews and critiques five articles that constitute this Special Issue seeking to establish ‘entrepreneurship as collective action’ as the next frontier of entrepreneurship theory development. The articles in this Special Issue each investigate a specific instance of collective action in entrepreneurship. This article contributes to extant scholarship by highlighting transversal themes and offering further research avenues.

Keywords

collective action, collective agency, collective enterprise, collective entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial teams.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship research is progressively moving away from the focus on a heroic individual (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Ogbor, 2000) towards an interest in the collective dimensions of entrepreneurship. Over the last two decades, a growing research stream has highlighted the importance of entrepreneurial teams and of their collective dynamics (Ben-Hafaïedh, 2017; Cooney, 2005; Piva and Rossi-Lamastra, 2017; Preller et al., 2020; Schjoedt and Kraus, 2009; Schjoedt et al., 2021). At present, a collective perspective on entrepreneurship as prosocial organizing is gaining traction (Branzei et al., 2018; Castellanza, 2022; Doh et al., 2019; Hertel et al., 2021; Wigger and Shepherd, 2020). Under various labels such as ‘social entrepreneurship’ (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018), ‘community-based entrepreneurship’ (Murphy et al., 2020; Seyb et al., 2019), ‘collective entrepreneurship’ (Dufays and Huybrechts, 2016; Meyer, 2020), ‘impact entrepreneurship’ (Markman et al., 2019), or ‘activist entrepreneuring’ (Dey and Mason, 2018), an emerging array of contributions has started to challenge the dominant understanding of entrepreneurship by arguing that entrepreneurship may also be considered as a social force of change instigated by the collective action of individual persons pursuing a common purpose.

As a result of these developments, vibrant, yet disconnected, conversations about entrepreneurship as a collective action have begun. However, these discussions have left many questions open such as how to conceive entrepreneurial collective action beyond the political-economic perspective (Olson, 1965 reinterpreted by Ostrom 1998, 2000) that specifies collective action as a pursuit of a common group interest by people that goes beyond individual self-interests. Several questions remain unexplored regarding entrepreneurship as collective action including are there any common features in heterogeneous entrepreneurial collective endeavours; and, when considering different stakeholders’ involvement in the entrepreneurial process (Saravathy, 2001; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), why does entrepreneurship require collectives to occur? Despite such issues and questions, the entrepreneurship conceptualization commonly relies on individual agentic behaviour as a paradigmatic foundation. Even when collective action is explicitly mentioned, the individual entrepreneur often remains the key unit of analysis (e.g., Saravathy and Ramesh, 2019). This means that scholars have yet to realize the full potential of entrepreneurship as a collective action; and few scholars have adopted a collective stance on key entrepreneurship concepts such as opportunity discovery or construction, effectuation, agency, or entrepreneurial alertness.

Purpose of the Special Issue

With this Special Issue (SI) we seek to establish ‘entrepreneurship as collective action’ as the next frontier of entrepreneurship research. Our ambition is to stimulate research and theory building on entrepreneurship as a collective action by linking extant recent research on this topic, by empirically illustrating it, and by conceptualising it. Departing from an individualistic perspective (Dimov, 2007) for this SI, we sought contributions that instead focus on collective action in entrepreneurship to offer new insights regarding how to conceive entrepreneurship as a collective action may challenge, renew, or enrich the entrepreneurship literature. In our efforts, we recognise that entrepreneurship as collective action requires further conceptual development and the conversation in the literature to advance to define the concept and process of entrepreneurship as collective action (Schad et al., 2019). We encourage such development and advancement of the literature to unfold the multiple meanings of the concept by questioning the premises and assumptions regarding entrepreneurship as collective action. With the SI we also sought research that focuses on entrepreneurship as collective action that would “challenge the core and extend [the] boundaries” (Schad et al., 2019: 107) of entrepreneurship research. It is arguable that approaching entrepreneurship as a collective practice - that is as organized patterns of activity involving shared rules, principles, tasks, and projects, and that include both “doings” and “sayings” (Schatzki, 1996; Champenois et al., 2020) - offers opportunities to advance greater understanding of the topic.

In line with the considerations above, we encouraged empirical and conceptual submissions for this SI, particularly research advancing understanding and conceptualization of “collective action” in entrepreneurship. We specifically sought research on the following themes and research questions:

1. *Linkages between existing research streams offering neighbouring notions:* social entrepreneurship, community entrepreneurship, impact entrepreneurship, collective enterprise, and entrepreneurial teams.
2. *New insights on collective processes and practices of entrepreneurship:* how do they unfold over time? With what outcome? What stabilised patterns or institutionalised forms emerge from collective entrepreneurial actions? How are they maintained or challenged over time? How to contextualize them?
3. *Methodological contributions and critical perspectives:* the different research approaches that might be employed to study entrepreneurship as collective action, and consideration of the possible dark sides of entrepreneurial collective action.
4. *Contributions to core concepts of entrepreneurship:* these might include concepts such as opportunity discovery or construction, effectuation, agency, or entrepreneurial alertness.

Our Call for Papers was kept deliberately open to encourage innovative or alternative approaches to the topic of entrepreneurship as collective action. This offered potential contributors and us, the Guest Editors, the possibility of receiving imaginative or visionary interpretations to entrepreneurship as collective action.

Special issue process and overview of selected papers

The initial call for papers for our SI was published in 2021. The submission deadline for full papers was 31st of May 2022. The Call for Papers generated 32 submissions. Of these, 16 papers were selected to enter a double-blind peer review process. On completion of the review process, five papers were selected for publication in this SI. The five selected papers in this SI exemplify the processes and practices of entrepreneurship as collective action. The studies span geographical contexts of Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, and Scotland. The contributing authors adopted various qualitative approaches to explore the emerging theme of entrepreneurship as collective action including longitudinal comparative as well as individual studies, enactive research, in-depth interviews, detached observation methodologies, plus secondary data analysed through grounded theory building, thematic analysis, and temporal bracketing methods. The research in this SI encompasses and connects various levels of analysis (micro, meso, and macro) and each study draws from rich and deep empirical data. The theoretical stances encompass social enterprise and community-based enterprise research crossed with an agency perspective; collective action and entrepreneurial ecosystems considered through a critical realist epistemology; collective entrepreneurial identity narratives approached through a practice theory perspective; Transactive Memory Systems combined with new venture teams' framework; and art collectives as public entrepreneurs.

The first three articles study entrepreneurship as a collective action at the *meso* level of a region. In their article, titled "The creation of collective enterprises for social impact: An agency perspective", Deschamps and Slitine investigate the creation process of collective enterprises that wash and reuse drinking bottles of glass for the purpose of reducing waste, promoting local business, and creating local jobs. Drawing on a longitudinal empirical study of two cases in France, with privileged access to participant and non-participant observations, interviews (n=40), and secondary data, the researchers examine the issue of entrepreneurship as collective action as collective agency. Specifically, Deschamps and Slitine ask: What form of agency develops and sustains the emergence of collective enterprises for social impact? These scholars offer a theoretical model of collective agency that sustains the emergence of collective enterprises. The key finding in this study is that the process of creating collective enterprises for social impact requires a specific form of collective agency by combining three interrelated dimensions (i.e., temporal stages): 'collective entrepreneurship' (i.e.,

practices laying the foundations of collective action); 'collective animatorship' (i.e., practices supporting the collective action, by embedding the project locally and by engaging new partners); and 'collective organising' (i.e., ensuring the continuity of collective action). Each of these stages involves different actors. Collective entrepreneurship is driven by a group of actors involved in the company's development who seek to engage collective action and hold a strong set of shared values including a desire to change the world. Collective animatorship refers to actors who are keen to contribute to local development. And, collective organising encompasses multiple stakeholders who are being mobilised. The study by Deschamps and Slitine offers two key contributions. First, through a theoretical model of collective agency, the authors provide new theoretical insights on the notion of entrepreneurial agency -- key in the field of entrepreneurship (McMullen et al., 2021), but is often conceived as an individual agency even if studied in a collective context (McMullen et al., 2021; Dacin et al., 2011; Gupta et al., 2020), or 'distributed' (Enfield and Kockelman, 2017; Garud and Karnøe, 2003). Deschamps and Slitine show that collective agency is, and subsequently, should be examined as a sum of practices, a process, (Caldwell, 2005) involving multiple practitioners (Champenois et al., 2020). With their conceptualisation of collective agency, these authors go beyond the focus on individual self-interest to emphasize that convergence among various practitioners around a common objective plays a key role in entrepreneurship as a collection action.

In the article by Hruskova, titled "Ecosystem pipelines: collective action in entrepreneurial ecosystems", the focus is on entrepreneurial ecosystems (and on their governance) at a regional level unit of analysis. Stressing that "we still know little about how ecosystem actors work collectively to assist entrepreneurs with starting and scaling their ventures" (p. XX), the author investigates how actors in an ecosystem engage in collective action, and how this collective action unfolds. Hruskova employs a case study approach using a Scottish entrepreneurial ecosystem and encompassing 51 semi-structured interviews with representatives of key ecosystem actors such as entrepreneurs, advisors, investors, entrepreneurship support organisations, professional service providers, corporate organisations, universities, and representatives from the local and national government. The author draws from Ostrom (1990) to consider collective action as a situation in which "diverse actors work together to achieve a common objective" (p. XX). A key contribution of the paper is the coining of the concept of 'ecosystem pipelines' to describe a novel ecosystem governance mechanism that results from collective action. Specifically, ecosystem pipeline refers to "logical pathways between ecosystem actors developed through collective action that enable entrepreneurs to secure resources as they launch, develop, and grow their venture" (p. XX). These ecosystem pipelines are relational structures formed through relationship building among actors via referrals and signposting allowing entrepreneurs to access necessary resources, including advice, support, and more, as the new

ventures develop. Considering an entrepreneurial ecosystem as a result of collective action means that recognizing their structural dimensions (such as the number and nature of participants) and their relational resources such as trust, reputation, reciprocity, and a shared purpose. This contribution renews research on entrepreneurial ecosystems by proposing a horizontal governance, rather than a top-down or a bottom-up approach, in entrepreneurship as collective action.

In the third article, titled “Scratching the surface of urban change: art collectives as public entrepreneurs”, Morea and Dalla Chiesa examine how artists in Venice, Italy, engage with the city to collectively meet local demands. As such, the artists act as public entrepreneurs seeking to achieve societal change (Beyes, 2015). These researchers interviewed representatives of 11 art collectives to examine the intended outcomes of various initiatives. Based on semi-structured interviews, their analysis took an interpretative turn. The authors examine how the art collectives address institutional voids, that is a lack of governmental or institutional support for overcoming social challenges (Stephan et al., 2015), and try “to fill identified gaps in the public agenda (public policy, urban planning and tourism strategies)” (p. XX) in the sense of provoking change (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2008). The main tension is that between a tourism-led urban ecosystem versus a city focused on locals. Three themes are discussed, tracing how the Venetian art collectives became public entrepreneurs: a locally grounded *raison d’être*, the translation of core values into artistic proposals, and the alignment of the collectives’ private goals with a public service ethos.

The findings provided by Morea and Dalla Chiesa reveal that, through their collective actions, the artists’ initiatives convey a message of urban change, contributing both discursively and materially, but do not have a substantial impact at the policy level as the artists’ initiatives is merely scratch the surface by making proposals for interventions. The authors argue that art collectives are a different form of public entrepreneurship as their actions are frequently quite ephemeral and therefore provoke or raise awareness rather than directly confront policymakers. According to Morea and Dalla Chiesa, art collectives “are not institutional changemakers; they try to upset the institutional arrangement by mediating local demands and offering sporadic and unsystematic cultural projects” (p.XX). Their work suggests that while art collectives may not be viewed as typical public entrepreneurs, it opens “a possible avenue of research for another type of urban actor, one caught up in the middle ground between grassroots artistic creation and impact-driven work within institutional contexts” (p.XX).

The last two articles take a *micro* level perspective in studying collective action within entrepreneurial teams in different contexts. In the article, titled “It all starts with a story: questioning dominant entrepreneurial identities through collective narrative practices”, Solbreux, Hermans,

Pondeville, and Dufays adopt an entrepreneurship-as-practice (Champenois et al., 2020) perspective to entrepreneurship as collective action. Developing a theoretical framework on collective entrepreneurial identity narratives, they consider entrepreneurial identity as something that is 'done' and 'said' (Gherardi, 2015) and, that is fluid and ever-changing. They offer a collective perspective on narrative identity construction. Solbreux et al. explore how collective narrative practices provide individual people with opportunities to depart from dominant entrepreneurial identities and to co-construct new, socially anchored identities. Using an original research method - scaffolding conversations (White and Epston, 1990), they study teams of students engaged in a 10-week social entrepreneurship course at a business school in Belgium. The data are gathered from reflective journals written by 68 students and are analysed to identify four archetypes (Witnesses, Resisters, Victims and Perpetrators). Solbreux et al. illustrate how identities evolve, as students incorporate other possible viewpoints that refer to, and emerge from, collective endeavours through the process of "thinning the plot" of dominant identities and "thickening the counterplot". Interestingly, they show through collective narrative practices, how practitioners may disrupt the dominant individual heroic entrepreneur myth to develop identities that align with an understanding of entrepreneurship as collective action. The study contributes to entrepreneurship-as-practice by offering a multiple-practitioner perspective on entrepreneurial identity construction. Notably, it shows how collective narratives provide opportunities to reflect on the role of teams and ecosystems in the process of entrepreneurial identity construction; conversely, the role of the protagonists as influencers in teams and ecosystems. Collective narratives support "attuning" with peers (i.e., articulating and feeling what matters and what people care about in the collective) which is a key element in the formation of collective agency. Solbreux et al. also offers methodological contributions by proposing a method that grasps practices at the group level, rather than at the individual one, to further advance research on entrepreneurship as collective action.

In the final article, titled 'Development of transactive memory systems in new venture teams', Georgiadou, Steinmo, and Lauvås investigate the dynamics taking place within technology-based entrepreneurial teams founded in a venture creation program at a Norwegian university. Their findings are rooted in a longitudinal study that encompasses 52 semi-structured interviews with individual participants and groups of participants from five new venture teams (NVTs) over three rounds of data collection, as well as secondary data. Using transactive memory systems (Wegner, 1987) as their theoretical framework, Georgiadou et al. approach entrepreneurship as collective action as the dynamics of working together within entrepreneurial teams. Transactive memory systems (TMS) refers to "the mechanisms that help to integrate and coordinate the expertise NVT members collectively possess" (p. XX). Building on the idea that individual persons may serve as

external memory support to each other, TMS are conceptualized as emerging when individual people search for help by contacting others (to solve problems that they cannot address alone), and by remembering these contacts as well as their contributions (Nebus, 2006). Georgiadou et al. explore how TMS emerge within entrepreneurial teams, including how expertise is identified, shared, and used by NVT members. Specifically, they investigate the process of collectivisation of individual members' expertise through integration and coordination of their expertise at the team level. The study by Georgiadou et al. advances our appreciation of entrepreneurship as collective action by identifying four processes through which TMS develop (enabling, encoding, storage, and retrieval) that are placed in a process model. By doing so, the authors reveal how TMS processes unfold in NVTs, and how entrepreneurial teams develop specialisation, credibility, and coordination that are considered indicators of TMS (Lewis, 2003). The strength of the process model provided is that it encompasses three stages: (i) pre-formation stage when entrepreneurial teams are just formed; (ii) formation stage when teams begin to develop their business idea, and (iii) collaboration stage when teams further advance their business idea. In addition, the authors provide three contributions pertaining to entrepreneurial teams and their work. First, the study furnishes evidence of the many efforts required by all team members in order to develop TMS such as collective expertise coordination and integration mechanisms. Second, it highlights the fluidity of knowledge circulation and use within NVTs as members continuously reassess each other's expertise revealing a need of constantly updating and refining TMS to be effective. Third, it offers new foundations for NVTs' efficiency through specialisation, credibility of others' expertise, and coordination among members. Like the other four contributions in this SI, the fifth contribution reveals insights into entrepreneurship as collective action.

Reflections and Insights

Our intent with this SI was to provide research contributions that depart from the conventional individualistic perspective in the entrepreneurship literature (Dimov, 2007) by focusing on entrepreneurship as collective action by showing how entrepreneurship as collective action challenges, renews, and enriches our collective understanding of entrepreneurship. Based on the studies in this SI, we obtained a richer and more diverse understanding of the concept of entrepreneurship as collective action.

Firstly, several articles explore the notion of *collective agency*. When McMullen et al. (2021) observe that entrepreneurial agency is not limited to individual people, they, in effect, propose distributed agency, and discuss the issues of communication and coordination costs as well as

conflicting interests. The study by Deschamps and Slitine in this SI provides conceptual clarification of collective agency in entrepreneurship; an issue that deserves more attention from researchers. Thus, these scholars with their contribution open avenues for future research that further conceptualize 'collective agency'. The findings by Deschamps and Slitine also highlight the value of research that combine the concept of collective agency with existing entrepreneurship concepts such as 'entrepreneurial ecosystems', which is furthered and confirmed by Hruskova's contribution in this SI. Further, Solbreux et al., in this SI, point to the discursive dimension of entrepreneurship as collective action. They focus on collective narratives that "reveal an increased sense of collective agency for nascent entrepreneurs, as they realise that the team members and the community share a desired social change and a motivation to act on it" (p. XX). Future research adopting a language-centred perspective of entrepreneurship as collective action holds potential to shed new informative insights.

Secondly, additional new insights that may be gained by considering the contributions in this SI collectively is the notion of self-organizing. Giorgiadou et al. discuss self-organizing teams and horizontal leadership within entrepreneurial teams. Hruskova observes relational organizing (Powell, 1990) in purpose-driven networks; while Morea and Della Chiesa examine bottom-up collectives. Drawing on the findings from these three studies collectively, future research may provide new insights by investigating the potential and limits of self-organizing and its dynamics. Such research may also integrate the conceptual foundations employed in other contributions to this SI: actors' awareness of partner activities (Hruskova), Transactive Memory Systems (Giorgiadou et al.), and collective animatorship (Deschamps and Slitine) to generate new insights into entrepreneurship as collective action.

Thirdly, our SI with its research contributions is suggestive of a strong link between entrepreneurship as collective action and the possibility to address the *grand challenges* in our World, sustainability (Markman et al., 2019; Doh et al., 2019), rather than growth per se. Such research holds potential to further the claim "that enterprises run by collectives and communities are agents for social change" (Meyer, 2020: 2). Solbreux et al. point out that the co-construction of emboldened yet realistic collective identities in an entrepreneurship context is needed to face the grand challenges of this world. Morea and Della Chiesa show that the art collectives via entrepreneurship as collective action mediate local demands and act for a better world. These findings encourage further investigation of entrepreneurship as collective action as the best-suited form to address Anthropocene (Parrique, 2023); the contemporary challenges of whether human civilization and its ability to meet and overcome a dramatically and turbulent world. Again, future research on entrepreneurship as collective action holds potential to assist with these challenges.

Lastly, Dufays and Huybrechts (2016) note that there is a need for identifying antecedents and outcomes of entrepreneurship as collective action. The contributions in this SI focus on the antecedents while adopting a processual lens. Specifically, Deschamps and Slitine study the process of creating collective enterprises for social impact to find that such venture creation requires a specific form of collective agency. Adding to this, Hruskova studies the formation of ecosystem pipelines; while Solbreux et al. investigate the emergence of collective entrepreneurial identities. By exploring the emergence and stabilisation dynamics of entrepreneurship as collective action, as done in this SI, future research holds potential to provide new insights on antecedents and outcomes of entrepreneurship as collective action. The role(s) and specificities of entrepreneurship as collective action are also shown in this SI by Deschamps and Slitine, Hruskova, and Morea and Dalla Chiesa. Additional research is needed on the roles and specificities of entrepreneurship as collective action.

Concluding Thoughts

We, the guest editors, all share an interest in entrepreneurship as collective action. We acknowledge that entrepreneurship is traditionally perceived as a process in which an individual pioneer, or, on occasion, a small group—an entrepreneurial team, brings a new venture into existence. This body of research is undergoing a profound transformation to become more inclusive of actors who have not traditionally been considered in entrepreneurship research. This development and an acknowledgement that individual entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial teams do not create their new ventures in isolation; instead, actors outside the nascent or new venture also make important contributions such as, but are not limited to, crowdfunding in which the public make monetary and other forms of contributions (e.g., information, feedback) to a new venture (Troise et al., Forthcoming). This means that our collective knowledge about entrepreneurship will be enriched by going beyond focusing on actions, decisions, or characteristics of an individual entrepreneur or an entrepreneurial team to entrepreneurship as collective action in which entrepreneurship includes actors, processes, and outcomes external yet impacting to the new venture and its performance. These considerations form the basis for our primary goal for this SI. We had a second goal with the SI. This was to provide examples of novel or, at least, different research methods in line with recent calls made in our field (Van Burg et al., 2022). In other words, we sought to move beyond correlational and positivist research approaches, specifically the widespread use of regression analysis, which traditionally dominates the entrepreneurship literature (Schjoedt and Bird, 2014).

The five contributions that make up this SI advance the entrepreneurship literature by investigating entrepreneurship as collective action and by employing non-conventional research

methods. Collectively, the five studies that make up this SI fulfil the two goals we set out to achieve for the SI. Furthermore as highlighted previously in this SI, entrepreneurship as collective action may be characterized by diverse practices situated in specific places, both geographical and virtual, and groups of actors, whom with their distinct strengths converge into pools of resources for the new venture creation or to craft solutions to foster economic or societal change such as obtaining resources for basic needs of the new venture such as capital or information via crowdfunding, or fulfilling any of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Our editorial shows that there is substantial opportunities for future research to advance our collective knowledge in the area of entrepreneurship as collective action.

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