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A Review of Entrepreneurship Bias and Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Orientation Construct

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Abstract:

Entrepreneurial orientation has been gaining increasing attention over the years. However, the conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation construct has evolved over the time and there are continuing debates about the applicability of the construct into various research settings. Two prominent debates that revolves around this construct include the individual versus firm level perspective and the independence and dimensionality issues about this construct. Both streams have provided empirical evidence and are highly valid and reliable in many studies for these varying arguments. This article addresses this varying opinion, drawing on prior theory and research and provides a clear distinction about conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation construct in the future research.

Keywords: *entrepreneurial orientation, individual level perspective, firm level perspective, independence, conceptualization*

1. Introduction

Conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation remain a debate in the entrepreneurship literature. Various scholars including Covin and Slevin (1991), Smart and Conant (1994), Lumpkin and Dess (2001), Wiklund and Shepherd (2005), Huges and Morgan (2007) and Tat, Nguyen, Tuyet and Ng (2007) have acknowledged the importance of entrepreneurial orientation for the survival and performance of the organization. Historically, entrepreneurship has been attributed to a person who undertake entrepreneurial efforts. The concept has evolved over the time and entrepreneurial orientation regarded as a process for which an organization tries to discover and exploit opportunities in the environment that it operates to ensure business sustainability (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2003). However, it is important for the entrepreneurial orientation concept to adapt to the situation under consideration to ensure best application of the concept (Weerawardena & Mort, 2006). Similar claims were posited by Ramachandran, Devarajan, and Ray (2006) that an organization must be able to adapt itself to competitive pressures to be sustainable in the business. Hence, it is important to understand the conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation concept so that it can best applied according to an appropriate research setting. Traditionally, within the entrepreneurship literature, entrepreneurial orientation was viewed as organization wide perspective simply because the top management within the organization sets the overall strategic direction and the process, practices and culture in support of the direction. As a result, entrepreneurial orientation construct historically measured at top management level (Lumpkin & Dess 1996). Nevertheless, entrepreneurial orientation is strongly associated with the commitment of an organization which portrays to commit itself into entrepreneurial behavior (Brown, 1996). Hence, the success of an organization largely dependent on the entrepreneurial behavior exhibited by the organizational workforce and a combination of entrepreneurial orientation dimensions and entrepreneurial behavior would help to improve organizational performance as a whole (Kreiser, Marino & Weaver, 2002). This article addresses these varying opinions, drawing on prior theory and research and provides a clear distinction about conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation construct in various research settings.

2. Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Orientation

2.1. Entrepreneurship Bias

In view of debates about definition of entrepreneurship, Wiseman and Skilton (1999) argue that entrepreneurship is still in the theory building stage and is a “multidisciplinary jigsaw” (Harrison & Leitch, 1996: 69). This argument is in support of historical development of entrepreneurship whereby the literature revealed that there are at least three perspectives of entrepreneurship which has made the field of research more complex. In respect to the varying perspectives, traditionally, there are three characteristics which clearly bias the entrepreneurship research. The literature argues whether the field of entrepreneurship should be perceived as firm level phenomenon, individual level phenomenon or merely an opportunity discovery at both firm and individual levels. The first bias in entrepreneurship revolves around the firm level phenomenon claim by early scholars. As cited by Lumpkin and Dess (1996), Schumpeter (1942) who was one of the earliest scholars of entrepreneurship argued that entrepreneurship should be perceived as a firm level phenomenon. Consistent with his early definition of entrepreneurship which is combination of new resources in new ways, he claimed that research and development should be routine of the organization. In line with claim by Gartner et al. (1992) that entrepreneurship is an organizational emergence, Baumol (1990) support the notion of Schumpeter (1942) that entrepreneurship can be more meaningful if it is conceptualized as a firm level phenomenon. In considering that entrepreneurship is a firm level phenomenon, Miller (1983) highlighted that organizations which are pioneer in entering market with proactive innovation and embracing risky ventures can be better described as entrepreneurial firm. The second bias in the literature of entrepreneurship mainly concentrates at individual levels. The literature discusses entrepreneurship by assigning the entrepreneurial role to an individual, who is known as an entrepreneur. Historically, any individual who is able to identify market opportunity, acquire required resources, and start a new venture with an aim of exploiting identified opportunities to generate profit is perceived to be an entrepreneur. Specific characteristics which clearly distinguish an entrepreneur from a non-entrepreneur are undertaken by past scholars (Brockhaus, 1982). Miller cited that according to Schumpeter (1949), any individuals who introduce new products and processes can be best conceptualized as an entrepreneur. However, Mises (1949) claim that possession of privileged information which could facilitate some entrepreneurial actions is also essential to enable an individual to be a successful entrepreneur. Nevertheless, since entrepreneurship is not only creation of new ventures but also exploitation of opportunities, “a person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of value around perceived opportunities” can also be better defined as an entrepreneur (Thompson, 2003: 49). As an extension of Thompson (2003), Kuratko and Hodgetts (2004) explained that any individual who is able to recognize opportunities and capable of being a change catalyst within their relevant marketplace can also be viewed as an entrepreneur. However, recent development in the entrepreneurship literature suggest that an entrepreneur should not only be efficient of opportunities discovery but also should be conceptualized as a person who have lower information cost than the other people in undertaking entrepreneurial actions (Casson & Wadeson, 2007). Over concentration of opportunity discovery have been debated as the third bias in the entrepreneurship literature. Generally, the first and foremost important stage in the entrepreneurial process will be an entrepreneurial opportunity discovery. Busenitz and Barney (1997) and Shane (2003) pointed that opportunity discovery is a parallel and synonymous activity of entrepreneurship. In contrary to this view, Nickerson and Zenger (2004) indicated that opportunity discovery merely relates to problem solving activity. While opportunity discovery could be objective or subjective according to contemporary entrepreneurship scholars (e.g. McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Companys & McMullen, 2007), it also includes technical skills such as market research and financial analysis and other areas of entrepreneurship covering domain of team-building, creativity, leadership and problem solving which are less tangible (Hills, Lumpkin, & Singh, 1997; Hindle, 2004). Such endeavours are a combination of firm as well as individual level phenomenon which often complement each other.

2.2. Individual vs. Firm Level Perspective

In order for organization to prosper in competitive business environment, entrepreneurial orientation becomes inevitable. Entrepreneurial orientation has been discussed in the literature from various perspectives. However, Cahill (1996) pointed that entrepreneurship research have achieved its state of fragmentation. It has still been a topic of much debate in management and entrepreneurship literature for past few decades. As far as social sciences are concerned, there are still gaps in the literature. To date, one of the prominent debates within the entrepreneurship literature is whether entrepreneurship research shall be viewed as individual level or firm level phenomenon. In view of this debate, Covin and Miles (1999) extended certain level of clarity by indicating that individual level entrepreneurship occurs when an individual champion idea within corporate context while firm level entrepreneurship come into play when there is an existence of entrepreneurial philosophy that permeates the entire organization's outlook and operations. Early researchers attributed entrepreneurial orientation to individual level perspectives. These researchers argued that while considering entrepreneurial orientation as individual level perspective, it will enable the organization to comprehend behaviour that drives entrepreneurial activities. An underlying reason that supports this claim is that elements that underpin growth of an organization such as innovation, risk taking, renewal of the organization and other related facets are not merely a sole responsibility of the owner or top management. Instead, it goes beyond a top management layer and is driven by the entire organizational workforce at all levels. However, Schumpeter (1942) made a contrasting attempt by shifting his analysis from the individual level perspective to firm level

phenomenon. An underpinning reason for this shift was his claim that eventually, entrepreneurship can only be dominated by firms which could devote resources in undertaking innovative efforts. Since then, most of the entrepreneurship research was focused at firm level (Zahra, Jennings, & Kuratko, 1999). On the suggestion of Miller (1983) that entrepreneurship researchers shall study firm level phenomenon considering unique characteristics that each firm of different types may have, wide array of entrepreneurship studies were conducted either conceptually (e.g. Covin & Slevin, 1991; Zahra, 1993) or empirically (e.g. Covin & Slevin, 1989; Zahra & Covin, 1995; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Wiklund, 1999; Davidsson & Wiklund 2001; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005; Keh, Nguyen, & Ng, 2007) and considerable evidence were produced into the investigation of the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and the firm performance. In addition, Lee, Lee, and Pennings (2001) concluded that identification of factors that encourage or constrain entrepreneurial orientation and organizational performance remain an important agenda in the entrepreneurship research. Zahra, Jennings and Kuratko (1999) indicated that entrepreneurial orientation test instrument measure developed by Covin and Slevin (1986) which focused at entrepreneurial orientation dimensions that was proposed by Miller (1983) which is an adaptation of Miller and Friesen's (1983) and Khandwalla's (1976, 1977) work was mainly used among owners and managing directors as a representative of the organization. This is based on the classical economics approach which claimed an individual entrepreneur as a firm. Therefore, there is clear distinction between the business owner and also manager and other employees in conduct of firm level entrepreneurship research although the research assessment was on an individual entrepreneurial orientation. There are continuous criticisms in adopting individual approaches to entrepreneurship as opponents of this approach (e.g. Gartner, 1989; Low & MacMillan, 1988) claim that it does not provide adequate explanatory value of entrepreneurial behaviour. In spite of these arguments, Cunningham and Lischeron (1991) argue that there are still theorists who believe that unique values and attitudes of individuals will help them to behave entrepreneurially. However, an objective measure of entrepreneurial orientation should include multiple levels of the organizational hierarchy with an aggregation of the individual data at the organization level (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). The importance of individuals in entrepreneurial orientation research was apparent when Wiklund (1999) indicated that it is difficult to attribute firm level outcome to individual as it doesn't portray the actual situation.

2.3. Independence of Entrepreneurial Orientation Dimensions

The independence of entrepreneurial orientation dimensions has been debated by entrepreneurship scholars for decades. Several claim the entrepreneurial orientation dimensions to be independent (e.g. Miller, 1983; Covin & Slevin, 1989; Wiklund, 1999; Madsen, 2007) while few others claim the same to co-vary (e.g. Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Kreiser, et al., 2002; Richard, Barnett, Dwyer, & Chadwick, 2004; Moreno & Cassillas, 2008). The following section will offer discussion about two streams of scholars who had differing opinion about entrepreneurial orientation dimension, whether one should consider it as a unidimensional construct or a multidimensional construct. The initial research about entrepreneurial orientation dimensions by Miller (1983) treated entrepreneurial orientation as a unidimensional construct. Since then the debate has surfaced arguing whether entrepreneurial orientation should be considered as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct. Acting on Miller (1983) claim, Covin and Slevin (1989) conducted a research among small manufacturing companies to investigate the factor loading of each dimension within entrepreneurial orientation construct. The study found that a single factor resulted in higher factor loading implying that the entrepreneurial orientation dimensions are empirically related, therefore it provides sufficient evidence to conclude that entrepreneurial orientation constitute a distinct, unidimensional orientation. Similar findings were also reported by Wiklund (1999) who considered three dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation construct namely, innovativeness, proactiveness and risk taking whereby these three dimensions converged into one entrepreneurial orientation construct. On a separate study, Madsen (2007) in his research concluded that the research findings provided sufficient evidence to conclude that it is acceptable to consider entrepreneurial orientation as a unidimensional measure. Nevertheless, different stream of scholars such as Lumpkin and Dess (1996), Kreiser et al. (2002), Richard et al. (2004) and Moreno and Casillas (2008) found a contrasting finding in regards to unidimensional claim of Miller (1983) and his proponents of entrepreneurial orientation construct. Early research by Lumpkin and Dess (1996) proposed entrepreneurial orientation as a multidimensional construct. His argument was further supported by Kreiser et al. (2002) in his study which involved firms from six countries attempting to investigate the dimensionality issue of entrepreneurial orientation construct in regards to firm growth. The study revealed that entrepreneurial orientation dimensions found to be better and robust predictor of firm growth than viewing the dimensions as a summated single entrepreneurial orientation construct. In order to further defend the independence of the dimensions and to provide further support of multidimensionality of entrepreneurial orientation constructs, Richard et al. (2004) conducted additional research and provided sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that entrepreneurial orientation dimensions should be regarded as multidimensional rather than unidimensional construct. In the study, Richard et al. (2004) found that the firm's performance was independently affected by two main dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation construct, that is, innovativeness and risk taking. Subsequent research by Moreno and Casillas (2008) investigated the same concern among small and medium enterprises. The study utilized Structural Equation Model (SEM) to further investigate the entrepreneurial orientation dimensionality issue and improved the certainty that entrepreneurial orientation is a multidimensional construct. Many empirical investigations have been undertaken in the past to understand the dimensionality issue of entrepreneurial orientation construct. However, scholars from each stream have still not concluded the issue. This issue is still lasting to which future researchers should view entrepreneurial orientation construct as a unidimensional construct or multidimensional

construct. Nevertheless, intervention of Covin, Green, and Slevin (2006) has somehow provided certain level of clarity and guidance on this issue. According to Covin, Green, and Slevin (2006), several theoretical aspects have been overlooked by proponents of unidimensional and also multidimensional construct. They claimed that Miller (1983) have viewed entrepreneurial orientation as a formative construct. Therefore, decomposing the constituents of entrepreneurial orientation into its dimensions is not applicable in Miller's research context. In contrast, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) provided critical attention to each of the entrepreneurial orientation dimension on an argument that every entrepreneurial orientation dimension may have different level of significance (high on a dimension and/or low on the other dimensions) on an organization. Therefore, composing all dimensions into a single entrepreneurial orientation construct may not be acceptable considering the different influence entrepreneurial orientation dimensions would have on the organization. On this vein, Covin, Green, and Slevin (2006) finally concluded that entrepreneurial orientation dimensionality is no longer a point of disagreement because Miller (1983) and Lumpkin and Dess (1996) proposed entrepreneurial orientation construct on a clearly different perspective. Although the proponents of both streams (unidimensional and multidimensional) are still debating on how should one perceive entrepreneurial orientation construct, various studies have shown that both streams are highly valid and reliable in many studies in the past in providing optimal model fit (e.g. Wiklund 1999; Kreiser, et. al., 2002; Green, Covin, & Slevin 2008; Runyan, Droge, & Swinney 2008). Thus, the debate on entrepreneurial orientation construct dimensionality issue in the entrepreneurship literature is somewhat misleading.

3. Conclusions

It is very timely to address the debates about conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation construct since the organizations are moving towards entrepreneurial culture. In order to describe alternative perspective of entrepreneurship, various entrepreneurship scholars (e.g. Webster, 1977; Cooper & Dunkelberg, 1986) has developed typologies that can be used in research which includes the two main areas of debate discussed in this article. However, there is no widely accepted consensus about the entrepreneurial orientation construct and its applicability to various research settings. In turn, it has invited continuing scholarly attempts to further strengthen the varying views of entrepreneurial orientation construct. As explained in the article, a clear distinction about conceptualization of entrepreneurial orientation construct is important so that it is applied in the most appropriate manner in the right settings to yield valid empirical research findings. Continuously testing and building on entrepreneurship will help to establish a broader yet stronger theory of entrepreneurship.

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