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Advances in Entrepreneurship Volume I

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Firm-Level Entrepreneurship and Field Research: The Studies in Their Methodological Context

Grant T. Savage
Janice A. Black

Entrepreneurship researchers operate from various paradigms that embrace a wide range of methods from quantitative to qualitative. The studies in this special issue offer an interesting mixture of field methods. We examine the authors' epistemological ("How do we know?") and teleological ("Why do we know?") choices, which affect the types of data gathered, the ways in which the data are analyzed, and the kinds of interpretations formed about the data. By placing these studies in their methodological context, we believe the truthfulness and credibility of the conclusions drawn by the authors will be better appreciated and more fully understood.

Like many other management topics, entrepreneurship operates from various paradigms (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990; Sandberg, 1992) that embrace a wide range of methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. By its very definition, entrepreneurship includes a departure "from the norms of average behavior" (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990, p. 20). Studying this topic invites an in-depth look at the people, processes, and contexts in which entrepreneurship occurs. Although the articles in this special issue address different facets of firm-level entrepreneurship, they all are grounded in field work in and around business organizations that have sought—some with success, some with failure—to generate entrepreneurial activities.

Field research in entrepreneurship has traditionally drawn upon well-accepted qualitative methods from the social sciences (Tesch, 1990), including ethnography (anthropology), participant observation (sociology), and case studies (psychology). These qualitative methods have been enriched during the past fifty years by the flourishes and additions made in not only the basic social science disciplines but also in education and linguistics (Tesch, 1990). Underlying and intertwined with these methods are diverse philosophies and schools of thought, including critical theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism (Tesch, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). One result of this diversity, as Miles and Huberman (1994) note, is that qualitative, field-based research may be understood from a number of perspectives. Indeed, Jacob (1989), Tesch (1990), and Wolcott (1992) each offer different ways to categorize the numerous qualitative methods that are used by field researchers.

A FIELD RESEARCH METHODS MATRIX

Although the studies in this special issue do not exemplify the more extreme approaches to field research, they do offer an interesting mixture of approaches, including methods often considered to be quantitative rather than qualitative. To help categorize the methodologies employed within this collection of studies, we examine the authors' epistemological ("How do we know?") and teleological ("Why do we know?") choices (see Figures 1 and 2). These choices affect the types of data gathered, the ways in which data are analyzed, and the kinds of interpretations formed about data. By placing these studies in their methodological context, we believe the accuracy and credibility of the conclusions drawn by the authors will be better appreciated and more fully understood.

The Epistemological Dimension

To explicate the epistemological dimensions of field research methods, we draw upon Wolcott's (1992) classification of qualitative methods. His classification scheme uses the analogy of a tree with three roots: experiencing, enquiring, and examining. These roots—epistemological categories representing different ways of knowing—form a trunk with various branches, including non-participant observation, participant observation, interviews, and archival techniques. Moreover, each major branch of the tree depends more or less upon a particular root, with experiencing linked to participant observation, enquiring to interviews, and examining to non-participant observation and archival techniques. Of course, this analogy is a simplification since researchers often draw upon methods that depend on various epistemologies. Indeed, the popular notion of triangulating across methods explicitly compares and contrasts the results of different ways of knowing.¹

More specifically, field research methods based on experiencing include any method of data collection where the researcher has a legitimate role as perceived by those who normally are at the field site and where the researcher records the data he or she has learned by observing and sharing in the normal activities in the field. This way of knowing encompasses such roles as worker, consultant, or researcher. Significantly, these roles may vary considerably with regard to their level of immersion in an organization's culture, with a lengthy period of continuous field contact (as found in ethnographies) representing one extreme, and a relatively short contact (as used by many consultants) indicative of the other.

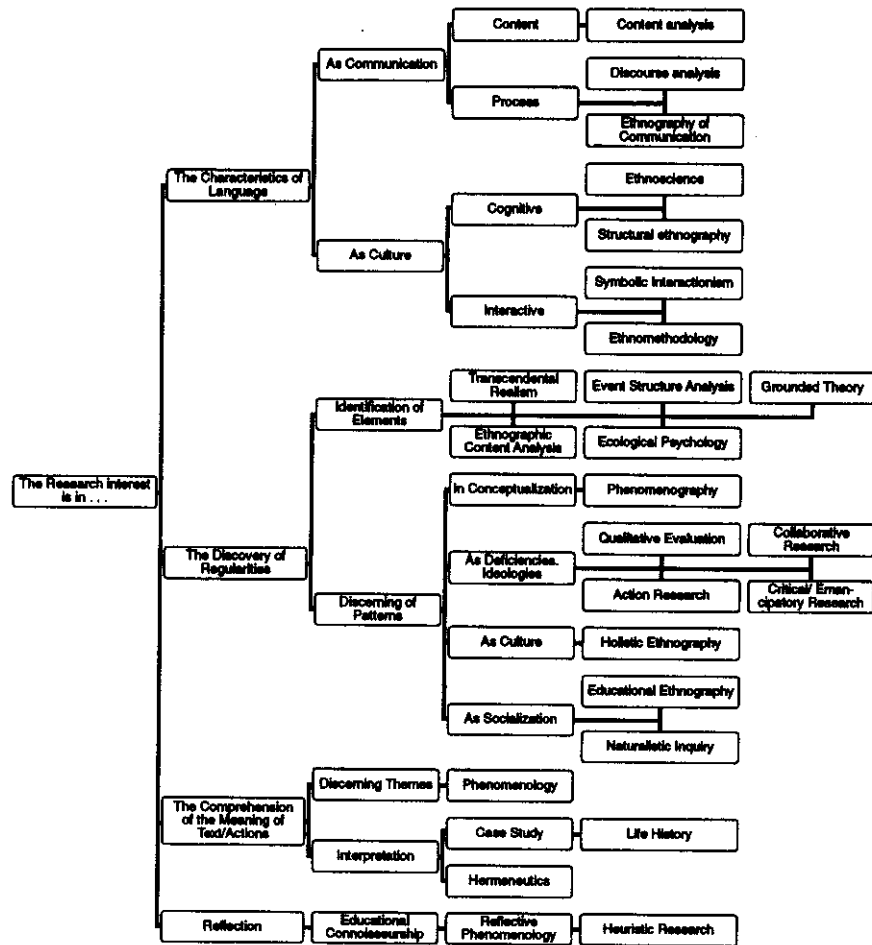
In contrast, field methods based on enquiring as a way of knowing encompass all types of interviews. By asking for information from field site members, the researcher engages in methods that depend on intersubjectivity as mediated by language and which elicit respondents' cognitions. For instance, the unstructured, face-to-face interview and the structured, closed-ended questionnaire are the two extreme anchors for methods relying on this epistemology.²

Lastly, field methods based on examining are restricted to the study of archival

1. Triangulation, interestingly, may be used for different purposes depending upon a researcher's philosophy of science. On one hand, those researchers adhering to the belief that there is a single reality, use triangulation to establish commonalities, treating differences in results as "noise" in the data that must be filtered. On the other hand, those researchers adhering to the view that multiple versions of social reality may exist, use triangulation to create multifaceted understandings of reality, highlighting rather than down-playing differences.

2. Paper-and-pencil surveys do meet the criteria of asking for a cognitive, language-based response and are thus included within this classification.

Figure 2
Graphic Overview of Qualitative Research Types (Tesch, 1990)



items, ranging from historical records to recent artifacts. On one hand, primary sources of archival data are naturally occurring artifacts that are produced by the people who are normally at the field site during its day-to-day activities. For example, included in this way of knowing are previously produced artifacts from the field site such as computer records, journals, memos, logs, tape recordings, and videos.³ On the other hand, popular press articles and other external documents about the field site are other sources of archival data.

3. Tape recordings are included if done by existing members of the field site; if done by the researcher we would consider the recordings a method that combines both experiencing and examining as a way of knowing.

The Teleological Dimension

Clearly, field researchers may gather the same types of data but then analyze the data differently and interpret the results in various ways. At the same time, different purposes often lead researchers to gather different types of field data. Both of these points underscore the importance of teleology in shaping field research. Fortunately, the work of Renata Tesch is especially relevant for exploring how the teleological dimension affects the types of data gathered and the analytical approaches associated with field research. Tesch (1990) classified the researcher's interest or purpose as falling into one of four categories: (1) the characteristics of language; (2) the discovery of regularities; (3) the comprehension of the meaning of the text or action; and (4) reflection. While these four interests vary from the more or less objective (characteristics of language) to the more or less subjective (reflection), they are not exclusive categories but vantage points along a shared pathway.

According to Tesch (1990), researchers investigating the "characteristics of language" either seek to understand the use of language as a form of communication or as an indicator of culture. The latter purpose is often fulfilled by ethnographies of communication; the former interest is typically associated with content and discourse analyses. On one hand, some researchers concerned with the "discovery of regularities" attempt to identify the elements constituting a social event by using grounded theory and event structure analysis. On the other hand, other researchers discern patterns across social situations by using such methods as action research, naturalistic inquiry, and holistic ethnography. Researchers who are interested in the "comprehension of the meaning of text/action" attempt to discern themes by using phenomenological approaches or to interpret events through the hermeneutic method. Lastly, researchers whose purpose is "reflection," according to Tesch, use methods that include connoisseurship, reflective phenomenology, and heuristic research.

CLASSIFYING THE AUTHORS' FIELD RESEARCH

We have chosen to focus sequentially on the articles in this special issue and to indicate where upon the two dimensions (epistemology and teleology) each article may be placed on the field research method matrix. To provide an overview, the articles in this issue represent a range of data collection and analysis methods that includes questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation. The questionnaires measure social networks (see Krackhardt and Stephenson), the interviews are semi-structured (see Dougherty and Ropo & Hunt), and the participant observation occurs from the consultant role (see Krackhardt and Stephenson). Hence, every cell in the field research method matrix is not filled (see Table 1). Even so, the methods used by the authors do cover the three main branches of Wolcott's epistemological tree, as well as the major categories within Tesch's four-fold teleological schema. Collectively, these diverse methodological approaches mean that the authors bridge subjective and objective orientations. Indeed, most of the authors bridged two or more epistemological and teleological categories through their methodological choices.

Krackhardt

Because Krackhardt's research is based on various methods of asking, we classify his work as an enquiring epistemology. Nonetheless, his methods vary from a high degree of control over the activities being addressed (written social network questionnaires) through a mid-range of control (semi-structured interviews) to a low degree of

Table 1

Methodological Context Matrix for Special Issue Articles

Teach's teleological categories	Wolcott's epistemological categories		
	Experiencing	Enquiring	Examining
<u>Characteristics of Language</u>	Stephenson	Dougherty Fiol Stephenson	Dougherty Fiol
<u>Discovery of Regularities</u>	Stephenson	Dougherty Fiol Krackhardt Ropo & Hunt Stephenson	Dougherty Fiol Jelinek & Litterer Ropo & Hunt
<u>Comprehension of Meaning</u>		Fiol	Fiol Jelinek & Litterer
<u>Reflection</u>			Jelinek & Litterer

control (informal conversations). Consequently, he also differentially involves himself in primary data collection. During both informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, Krackhardt's interpretations of the situation move to the foreground; in contrast, the social network questionnaires place the interpretations of the respondents in the foreground. By using these "asking" techniques, he demonstrates that the phenomena that he is researching are not dependent upon his interpretation and that other researchers may rely on what he has uncovered and presented. Indeed, he deliberately conducted the semi-structured interviews in order to clarify what his other methods previously had revealed.

While Krackhardt is very careful about the language he uses, he does not make the classification of language the focus of his research. Rather he is interested in examining a pattern and, more particularly, to identify particular elements of that pattern, to "build on the theme about the role of strong ties in inhibiting change." Hence, on the teleological dimension, we categorize his study as guided by an interest in the "discovery of regularities."

Stephenson

On the epistemological dimension, Stephenson's work spans both the experiencing and the enquiring categories. Because she was a participant observer in six departments over the two-year duration of her field contact, she draws upon experiencing as a way of knowing. During this time of contact, however, she also administered social network questionnaires, once before and once after a major organizational restructuring. Both of the questionnaires had high response rates (65% and 42%, respectively), but they fell short of the census often sought by social network analysts. Nonetheless, these questionnaires fall into the category of "asking," and they allowed her to note differences in the revealed social structures.

Although her work is a subset of a larger ethnography, Stephenson discusses both the communication and the social network patterns within the organization she researched. These dual outcomes lead us to evaluate her work on the teleological dimension as seeking both to understand the characteristics of language and to discover regularities across social interactions.

Fiol

Fiol's study includes a combination of interviews and archival research. Her focus is on a special project team which maintained a shared journal. She thus had access to a real-time record, with contributions from all project members. At the same time, she was able to interview various project members. Significantly, the project journal allows her to cross-check her respondents' recollections and to better understand the context for memos and other archival documents. Thus, on the epistemological dimension, we classify Fiol's work as bridging both the "enquiring" and the "examining" categories.

Because her work accesses various "thought worlds" by examining and enquiring about the stories and themes found in the project journal, Fiol taps into not only the "characteristics of the language" but also the "comprehension of meaning" and the "discerning of patterns" categories on the teleological dimension. On one hand, she states that the aim of her study is to explore "communication patterns"; on the other hand, Fiol defines the boundaries of a "thought world" as being the "interpretive dimension of people's role, that is the often implicit rule by which they attribute meaning to their position and task."

Ropo and Hunt

Ropo and Hunt's study relies explicitly on interviews and archival documents.⁴ Specifically, Ropo and Hunt studied multiple sites within the banking industry in Finland, and their interviews are drawn from multiple levels of management within each organization. Hence, on the epistemological dimension, we classify their work as drawing—from more to less—on the categories of enquiring and examining. Moreover, as with Stephenson's and Krackhardt's studies, Ropo and Hunt's work is strengthened by its explicit triangulation both across methods and across respondents.

On the teleological dimension, Ropo and Hunt are clearly interested in the "discovery of regularities," stating that they want to "discern entrepreneurial processes in a changing opportunity structure context." More specifically, they are concerned with what Tesch (1990) described as the identification of elements and the exploration of their connections, a teleological subset within the discovery of regularities category.

Dougherty

On the epistemological dimension, Dougherty's study falls primarily in the enquiring and secondarily in the examining categories. Specifically, to gather her data, she engaged in unstructured interviews with a variety of respondents from four different companies. Based on her systematic case sampling technique, some respondents were directly involved in project teams and others were indirectly involved. In addition, the

4. Implicitly, it also draws upon the senior author's direct observations over a three- to five-year period. In this regard, Krackhardt's, Fiol's, and Dougherty's works also draw implicitly on what the authors have learned from direct observations at their field sites.

project teams were from various industries, and the projects reflected a range of success and failures. Moreover, Dougherty supplemented these interviews with archival data sources.

Dougherty engages in a "search for underlying patterns in the data," studying the interaction between new products and core competencies. She also refers to this process as "the tracing down of patterns and consistencies." Hence, on the teleological dimension, we categorize Dougherty's work as interested in the "discovery of regularities."

Jelinek and Litterer

The article by Jelinek and Litterer summarizes and interprets their previous research, posing somewhat of a dilemma in classifying the epistemological dimension of their work. On one hand, their article is a form of examining past records and interpretations. (Because their previous work was primarily collected from the field, we judged that this one-generation-removed article also could be considered the result of field contact.) On the other hand, the past records that Jelinek and Litterer examine are largely based on interviews, a form of enquiring. (Moreover, they do an artful job of including examples from their previous work to help us understand how they made sense of their research stream.) However, because of the reflective nature of their work, we classified their study on the epistemological dimension as fitting primarily in the "examining" category.

On the teleological dimension, Jelinek and Litterer's work spans three categories. First, their original field research embodied a search for regularities, a focus continued in this work. Second, Jelinek and Litterer are searching for the meaning of their previous research—their "text"—in this article. Third, they are accomplishing both of these other purposes by engaging in reflection. In other words, by engaging in "reflection," Jelinek and Litterer bridge the "discovery of regularities"—the focus of their previous work—with the "comprehension of meaning."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As we illustrate in Table 2, if one considers the use of "pure" versus "hybrid," "triad," and "quadrate" categories on the epistemological and teleological dimensions, the implications of the contributing authors' methodological choices become clearer. The two articles that fall into a "pure" epistemological category are Krackhardt's study (which, nevertheless, relies on three forms of enquiry) and Jelinek and Litterer's study. The rest of the articles, to one degree or another, represent combinations of epistemological categories. Stephenson's work is a hybrid between experiencing and enquiring. Both Fiol and Dougherty combine enquiry with examination. However, Fiol balances the use of archival documents and interviews in her article, while Dougherty and Ropo and Hunt appear to rely more on their interview data and supplement that data source with archival data.

Interestingly, on the teleological dimension, all of the studies share an interest in the discovery of regularities, with both Krackhardt's and Ropo and Hunt's studies focusing exclusively on this category. In contrast, the remaining articles have additional purposes. Jelinek and Litterer are interested in reflecting upon and comprehending the meaning of their previous research. Dougherty, along with Fiol and Stephenson, pursued an interest in the characteristics of language. Moreover, Fiol also pursued an interest in comprehending the meaning of the text (project journal) that she examined.

This is obviously not an exhaustive compilation of all firm level entrepreneurship

Table 2

Methodological Context Usage Matrix for Special Issue Articles

Tesch's teleological categories	Wolcott's epistemological categories		
	"Pure" Single Category	"Hybrid" Dual Categories	"Triad" Three Categories
"Pure" Single Category	Krackhardt	Ropo & Hunt	
"Hybrid" Dual Categories		Dougherty Stephenson	
"Triad" Three Categories	Jelinek & Litterer	Fiol	
"Quadrant" Four Categories			

articles and, as a result, not all cells of the field research methods matrix are illustrated. Yet the unfilled cells also indicate opportunities for researchers. For example, studies that focus on the meaning of entrepreneurial actions, especially in conjunction with an experiencing method of data collection and understanding, would probably add insights not revealed by these studies. Similarly, research that focuses on reflection across both experiencing and examining entrepreneurship would also provide fruitful areas to explore. In addition, no work in this special issue fully exploited field work that encompasses all three of the epistemological categories. Opportunities thus remain for field researchers interested in choosing either an array of epistemologies or a single epistemological category and matching those ways of knowing with combinations of teleological categories.

Despite these criticisms, the authors display a wide array of approaches along the two dimensions we have used to articulate field research methods. Even more remarkable, given the fairly broad methodological contexts utilized by this limited number of studies, is the consistency of results that is achieved. A common theme is interwoven across the articles even though they focus on different research interests and use various ways of knowing. Indeed, although different bases for the creative tensions underlying firm-level entrepreneurship are illuminated by the various authors—including virtual groups, company inertia, thought worlds, core competencies and incompetencies, virtuous/vicious configurations, and legitimacy/illegitimacy—they are all set up as dialectical forces.⁵

What do these results imply about firm-level entrepreneurship and its methodological context? First, these studies provide reasonable assurance that the construct of firm-level entrepreneurship is viable and demonstrable. Second, multiple facets of firm-level entrepreneurship can be revealed by field researchers pursuing differing research interests and following various ways of knowing. Third, other entrepreneurship researchers should be encouraged to try field approaches—especially those that combine multiple interests with various ways of knowing—and to develop the many as yet under-explored facets of entrepreneurship.

5. On a theoretical level, this common theme suggests the value of Anthony Giddens's (1979, 1984) work on structuration theory and the dialectical forces constituting society and its various institutions.

By assessing the methodological context of these entrepreneurship articles, we have attempted to facilitate their integration within the entrepreneurship literature and have shown where several future methodological opportunities exist. While opportunities abound, whether we—as researchers—take an entrepreneurial stance and exploit them remains to be seen.

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