

# Is There an Elephant in Entrepreneurship? Blind Assumptions in Theory Development\*

William B. Gartner

University of Southern California

## Abstract

This article uses the six key specification decisions for entrepreneurship research (purpose, theoretical perspective, focus, level of analysis, time frame, and methodology) outlined in Low and MacMillan (1988) to explore unstated assumptions in entrepreneurship theory development. An article by Shane and Venkataraman (2000), "The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Research," is analyzed and recommended as a model for clarity. A recommendation is made that the field of entrepreneurship needs to develop communities of scholars identified with specific research questions and issues.

*In the farthest reaches of the desert there was a city in which all the people were blind. A king and his army were passing through that region, and camped outside the city. The king had with him a great elephant, which he used for heavy work, and to frighten his enemies in battle. The people of the city had heard of elephants, but never had the opportunity to know one. Out rushed 6 young men, determined to discover what the elephant was like.*

The intention of this article is to reflect and speculate on the status and uses of theory in entrepreneurship research using Low and MacMillan's (1988) review of the entrepreneurship field as a starting point. Their review covered six key specification decisions that scholars should consider when conducting entrepreneurship research: purpose, theoretical perspective, focus, level of analysis, time frame, and methodology. One key insight from their article is that "These design specification decisions are interrelated, and cannot be made independently" (p. 140). Apropos this insight, this paper will explore how the choice of theoretical perspective in entrepreneurship hinges on assumptions made about these other specification decisions.

As a way to begin this exploration, my point of departure for discussing entrepreneurship theory begins with Low and MacMillan's advice for scholars in entrepreneurship that "the field will be better served in the future if the issue of theoretical perspective is addressed directly and unstated assumptions avoided" (1998, p. 146), I concur. The thesis of this article is that theory development in entrepreneurship research depends on whether we are conscious of the assumptions we make about this phenomenon. Some evidence suggests that entrepreneurship scholars are not

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conscious of their assumptions. Gartner (1990) found that entrepreneurship scholars held very different beliefs about the nature of entrepreneurship, and that they had very different views of what entrepreneurship, as a phenomenon, consisted of. Implicit in those findings was a fear that research based on these different views would result in a cacophony of results and ideas. Synthesizing different results without some common conscious sense of the fundamental attributes of entrepreneurship would merely add another layer of confusion. At that point, I believed that "Only by making explicit what we believe can we begin to understand how all of these different parts make up a whole" (Gartner, 1990, p. 28). I am not sure that the entrepreneurship field has reached some sense of theoretical clarity during the past decade.

Since the Low and MacMillan (1988) article, there has been a bonanza of efforts at generating theory in entrepreneurship. The Interdisciplinary Conference on Entrepreneurship Theory held in January, 1991, at the University of Baltimore resulted in a two-volume set of articles published in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (1991, 1992a). The Theory Building Conference on Entrepreneurship held at the University of Illinois in October, 1991, resulted in a one-volume set of articles in the *Journal of Business Venturing* (1993) as well as an edited book (Bull, Thomas, & Willard, 1995). Other theory-development efforts included a "virtual conference" on models of organization formation in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (1992b, 1993), and some of the Gateway Conferences (Katz & Brockhaus, 1993, 1995; Katz, 1997). In addition, Don Sexton continued to bring scholars together to discuss and review research in entrepreneurship in conferences at the University of North Carolina in 1990 (Sexton & Kasarda, 1992) and at the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City in 1996 (Sexton & Smilor, 1997). And, to top it off, there was the publication of the results of a forum held at Carnegie Mellon University in 1997 of internationally distinguished scholars who thoughtfully ruminated on the future of entrepreneurship research (Sarasvathy, 2000). These citations are by no means comprehensive (see Brazeal & Herbert, 1999).

Despite the creation of more theory in entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship scholars have noticed the difficulty of integrating entrepreneurship theory-development efforts into any coherent scheme. The following quotes are representative of these concerns:

One interesting observation that emerged from this exercise is that each discipline has its own unique way of viewing entrepreneurship which remains relatively unaffected by the perspectives of other disciplines. In other words, we see evidence that many "uni-" rather than one or more "multi-" disciplinary views of our field currently exist" (Herron, Sapienza, Smith-Cook, 1991, p. 7)

Despite the number of published papers that might be considered related to the theory of entrepreneurship, no generally accepted theory of entrepreneurship has emerged. ... Despite the potential for richness and texture that such a diverse mix of disciplines brings, a major weakness is that, in many cases, researchers from one discipline have tended to ignore entrepreneurship studies by researchers in the other disciplines (Bull & Willard, 1993, p. 184, citing Wortman, 1992).