



## Entrepreneurship and the rest: The missing debate

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we seek to open a debate within entrepreneurship scholarship around a prevailing reductionist view when it comes to non-western or alternative contexts. We argue it is incapable of capturing behavioral differences across contexts without making ethnocentric, narrow and simplified theoretical assumptions about ‘the rest’. Drawing on the sociology of absences, we explain why the concept of entrepreneurship, as it relates to development, has remained captive and constrained by western economic and cultural assumptions, which has been boosted by a worrying absence of self-criticism. This is problematic but equally full of missing opportunities. Drawing from cultural relativism and the sociology of emergences, in this paper we propose a refreshed agenda for advancing research at the intersection of entrepreneurship and development, marked by the possibility of alternative futures and the potency of hidden causes.

### 1. Introduction

In this article, we argue that current entrepreneurship scholarship, beyond western borders, offers only a reductionist view of the phenomenon. It understands that entrepreneurial action is one we have synthesized in the west and whatever happens in the ‘rest’ is most of the time insufficient or inferior. This is typically viewed as requiring a replication of what has proven successful in industrialized countries needing a major institutional reengineering to function appropriately. We argue that this is the same technocratic illusion and theoretical blindness that has been observed in critical development studies (Easterly, 2014, 2007; Escobar, 2011).

The conceptual debate between the transcendental institutionalism (Sen, 2009) – the focus on an ideal framework for entrepreneurial behavior – that still characterizes western entrepreneurship research and the legitimacy of the emerging behaviors we observe in the rest (which diverge from the assumed norm) is still missing. By western entrepreneurship research, we mean one that frames the phenomenon as a set of human activities involved in the pursuit of business opportunities and/or the emergence of a new firm within a neoliberal conception of markets and institutions, making causal attributions within the boundaries of liberal humanism. One that therefore focuses on studying the antecedents, influencers, processes, outcomes and consequences of such a limited set of activities in a rather narrow set of ideological and cultural contexts.

Echoing recent debates in critical development studies (Easterly, 2006, 2014; Ziai, 2015), in this article we aim to open such a discussion. We argue that only a serious reconsideration of our ontological position will enable an adequate and place-sensitive development of the field that disrupts assumptions about other contexts, seen as less developed, impoverished and even desperate. This involves addressing the problematic lack of self-criticism within entrepreneurship research when it comes to the rest living in non-western contexts, the narrow appreciation of development theories and the complexity of development itself, as well as the

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**Table 1**  
Research Agenda.

	Traditional explanation and solution	Exploring possibilities	Exploring capacities (illustrative research questions)
<b>Individual</b>	The problem derives from individual laziness, bad choice, incompetence, inherent disabilities → It is about individual capacities. We need to understand and develop individuals with the adequate knowledge, skills and mindset.	In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of agency, human capital, motivation and future orientation? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of counterintuitive cognitive and behavioral determinants?	In the rest: How can [productive] entrepreneurial action be explained through indigenous, spiritual, religious and/or mystical knowledge? How do these types of knowledge compliment western conceptions of human capital? How is [productive] entrepreneurship possible without an appreciation of future circumstances?
<b>Cultural</b>	The problem derives from subcultures adopting values that are non-productive and are contrary to norms of success → It is about social norms. We need to understand and develop informal institutions that are inconsistent with market development and require development.	In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of a 'culture of entrepreneurship' and social norms assumed to be conducive to productive enterprises? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of non-conductive or non-supportive cultural and social norms?	In the rest: Does the creation of a [productive] entrepreneurship sub-culture help or hinder development? How do [productive] entrepreneurs organize outside of this subculture where it is assumed to be non-productive? What are the non-conductive or non-supportive cultural and social norms leading to [productive] entrepreneurship?
<b>Political-Economic</b>	The problem derives from systematic barriers preventing poor from access and accomplishment in key social institutions including jobs, education, housing, health care, safety, political representation, etc. → It is about the rules of the game. We need to understand and develop 'strong' formal institutions can improve the environment for entrepreneurs	In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of private property, rules and laws that typically support business development? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of totalitarian or anarchist institutional forms?	In the rest: How is [productive] entrepreneurship possible (and what does it look like) in the absence of private property, rules and laws? Is there an alternative universal "right" set of formal institutional arrangements for understanding relationship between development and [productive] entrepreneurship?
<b>Geographical</b>	The problem derives from the fact that social advantages and disadvantages concentrate in separate areas. → It is about agglomeration, distance, economies of scale and resource distribution. We need to understand and develop disadvantaged areas to elicit market development.	In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of resources or in places lacking the adequate material infrastructure, agglomeration or economies of scale? ... emerges in the presence [or as a result] of inhospitable market conditions?	In the rest: How do [productive] entrepreneurs organize themselves outside (or against) those geographical contexts fostering market development? Is there an alternative set of geographical and market conditions for [productive] entrepreneurship to flourish?
<b>Cumulative</b>	Problems cumulate to cause spirals of poverty, problems for individuals are interdependent and strongly linked to community deficiencies. → It is about spirals of poverty. We need to understand and develop locally embedded entrepreneurial ecosystems	In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of virtuous cycles? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of spirals of poverty?	In the rest: What alternative cumulative forces can better explain the relationship between [productive] entrepreneurship and development? How do these forces combine and interact over time?

\*Our emphasis on productive entrepreneurship, rather than entrepreneurship in general, derives from [Baumol's \(1990\)](#) seminal distinction between productive, unproductive and destructive forms of entrepreneurship. While we do not fully adhere to his deterministic view where everything depends on the payoffs structure of the economy, contexts do shape action. Additionally, we agree on that only certain forms play some substantial role. We therefore seek to delineate the agenda particularly around those entrepreneurial activities that make a productive contribution to society.

neglected power relations between western and non-western knowledge creation that still prevail in our field ([Peredo and McLean, 2013](#)).

Dealing with a widely ethnocentric, narrow and simplified view of the phenomenon, we argue that a position of cultural relativism would be beneficial for advancing research at the intersection of development and entrepreneurship. Outside of the entrepreneurship domain, this has emerged by embracing of postcolonial theories in management ([Nkomo, 2011](#); [Özkazanç-Pan, 2008](#)) and discussion of epistemological origins ([Jaya, 2001](#)). However, such a critique has only been partially articulated within entrepreneurship research (e.g. [Peredo and McLean, 2013](#)). We build on this prior research by drawing from [de Sousa \(2012\)](#) sociology of emergences.

Embracing cultural relativism, in this paper we propose a radical agenda that uses the sociology of emergences ([de Sousa, 2012](#)) to explore alternative tendencies in a conjectural manner, along five critical areas reflecting the complexity of development. Firstly, we discuss how current entrepreneurship theory is applied in developing, non-western, impoverished and/or typically 'unconventional' contexts, which we argue lacks criticality. Secondly, we draw from [de Sousa \(2012\)](#) to problematize this to emphasize the shortfalls of extant research. Thirdly, we propose a refreshed research agenda that builds on extant theoretical knowledge, yet

embraces new ideas. We posit a set of novel research themes and derive research questions constrained and boosted at the same time by the possibility of alternative futures and the potency of hidden causes. We see an opportunity here to avoid stagnation and abuse of incrementalism (Shepherd, 2015) and move towards novel theorizing and truly transformational research which can enrich the field through new perspectives (March, 2005).

## 2. Entrepreneurship and development: Where (do we think) we are now

In 2013, *Journal of Business Venturing* published its special issue on ‘desperate poverty’ with a specific aim to learn more about how entrepreneurship can be a solution to development challenges (Bruton et al., 2013). In their opening remarks, they state, “with over a third of the world’s population living in conditions of poverty, entrepreneurship scholars should seek to investigate issues that encourage and sustain entrepreneurship among those living in poverty as a path along which to improve lives” (p.684). Whilst no doubt important to furthering our understanding of this phenomenon, we argue here a need for a refreshed research agenda at the intersection of development and entrepreneurship. In the following, we depict how current research views entrepreneurship in the contexts of development, poverty and lesser-known settings of study.

Despite the emergence of entrepreneurship research in this area it is surprising how little critical discussion exists regarding the nature of development itself, and the circumstances arguably influencing thereof, such as poverty, inclusion, etc. In discussing the nature of entrepreneurial opportunities, Alvarez and Barney (2014) posit that ‘abject poverty’ is a result of different opportunity types: with the necessary human and financial capital, and property rights, wealth may improve. Scott et al. (2012) similarly discuss development and economic ‘empowerment’ in South Africa as a central issue; Boso et al. (2013) link entrepreneurship and development through firm performance whilst making assumption about its impact on broader economic outcomes; Bruton et al. (2011) suggest that entrepreneurs must be able to delay gratification in order to succeed. Elsewhere, the transformative economic effects of entrepreneurship are discussed (Tobias et al., 2013) under the continued guise that entrepreneurship is a potential elixir to the perceived challenges of developing economies.

In a similar yet contrasting stream of research, it has emerged that the relationship between development and entrepreneurship does not merely concern economic outcomes at either firm or macro level. Bradley et al. (2012) introduce a broad approach to understanding development which is fundamentally in line with Sen’s (1999) non-economic explanations of poverty: development is about freedom of which income is only one component. Indeed, these more holistic representations of development and its determinants are beginning to emerge in the literature (Chliova et al., 2015; Gries and Naudé, 2010; Kimmitt et al., 2016). Such a philosophical perspective draws on the idea that what is relevant to development is to understand a person’s freedoms and rights. However, a more detailed argument of this nature is largely missing from current entrepreneurship research.

Such a critical perspective is more apparent in the development studies literature. Schwittay et al. (2011) critiques the “base of the pyramid” (BoP) perspective generally, arguing that it represents a ‘marketization’ of development and poverty more specifically that does little to affect actual structural change. Di Nunzio (2015) similarly demonstrates the ineffectual outcomes of entrepreneurship programs which ultimately perpetuate structural issues; entrepreneurs are democratized economically yet are hampered by lack of political agency. This resonates with Garikipati (2012), who argues that entrepreneurship support programs amongst women tend to reify male ownership over household assets. Dolan and Rajak (2016) argue that entrepreneurship initiatives in the BoP ‘crystallize’ the line between the poor and non-poor: ultimately reinforcing the divide between the successful and those demonized as failures and lazy.

In summary, extant entrepreneurship research lacks such a critical perspective whilst primarily drawing from well understood theoretical notions which may only be partially useful in understanding entrepreneurship in those contexts. Our view of entrepreneurship and its potential operates in a distinctly ethnocentric manner; thus, research on entrepreneurial success, transformation, empowerment, well-being and so forth is distorted by our perceptions about what that looks like. This indicates that our current theoretical understanding in such contexts may only be partial at best. If entrepreneurship scholars have the potential to contribute to this area (which we believe they do), then we must adopt a more critical perspective when studying the relationship between entrepreneurship and development, and prescribing entrepreneurial-based solutions to the problems constraining development, such as poverty, education, and health.

## 3. A note on problematizing and conceptualizing

Before moving forward, let us briefly address two unavoidable problems underlying our efforts to problematize and (re)conceptualize this space of inquiry. The first issue pertains the irony in our use of the term ‘development’, since the very same term implies a superior-inferior relationship between what is a developed, developing and underdeveloped context, rather than simply capturing descriptive differences. Secondly, at the time we try to articulate such descriptive differences our argument risks being trapped into a paradox of analysis. The problem we would need tackle is one of definitional boundaries and the consequent separation, sometimes binary, between how entrepreneurship is defined and framed in one context in comparison to a different context. A critical analysis of the development/underdevelopment dichotomy in the absence of the words development and underdevelopment cannot be correct and informative at the same time. Solving this conceptual problem would require re-definitional work, which would take us back to the very same problem we would have been trying to solve in the first place. Aware of this limitation, we will draw from Poole and Van de Ven (1989) to explicitly accept the paradox and use it in a constructive way. In order to ignite this debate, we thus believe that using the (rather) arbitrary delineations between development and under-development, western and non-western - while acknowledging and elaborating on those descriptive differences - is nevertheless useful to engage with current debates and ignite a productive discussion.

#### 4. Problematizing ethnocentric research

The aforementioned critique of entrepreneurship research raises the question as to why a more critical view is yet to emerge. We believe this to be because of how we synthesize entrepreneurial action in the ‘global North’ and apply it to understanding the same phenomena in the ‘global South’. Peredo and McLean (2013) argue that the concept of entrepreneurship has remained captive because it has been built out of constrained (western) economic and cultural assumptions. In the following, we problematize this issue further by drawing from the work of de Sousa (2012). In his work on the ethnocentric nature of social theory, de Sousa (2012) discusses the ‘sociology of absences’: a set of logics and mechanisms through which western knowledge in the global north claims power over alternative approaches in which they become absent or non-existent in our theories.

Firstly, is the idea that science, knowledge and high culture lie behind a search for truth and aesthetic quality. Secondly, is the idea that time is linear in the sense of development and progress. Thirdly, is the reflection of how hierarchies, social classification and individual differences become legitimized and distorted. Fourthly, is the notion of the assumed universalism of western knowledge which may exclude local contexts, realities and behaviors. Lastly, is the logic of productivity in which growth and development progress are seen as the principal criteria for understanding outcomes. The above logics combine to imply that what is created outside of it is inferior, local and/or unproductive (de Sousa, 2012).

The first logic refers to the ‘monoculture of knowledge’ and consists of a view whereby science, knowledge and high culture are the sole criteria for truth. Thus, all forms of knowledge which are not seen as legitimate are viewed as non-existent which manifests in a view of ignorance. This problem is highlighted across a number of examples in current research. Alvarez and Barney (2014) suggest that human capital is critical but “Even the poor with little to no skill can articulate a need for their product” (p.176). Bradley et al. (2012) discuss the relevance of human capital and business-related experience in particular for understanding entrepreneurial outcomes. This perspective presses the idea that entrepreneurship is concerned with individual-level factors; success or failure is explained through enlightenment or ignorance rather than environmental conditions.

In this view, ‘non-scientific’ knowledge must also be seen as a credible form which embraces alternative sets of practices and forms of knowledge outside of those typically created and understood within entrepreneurship research. Thus, it involves recognizing religion, divinity, indigenous and rural forms of knowledge, for example, which may also be central to understanding entrepreneurial behavior. Peredo and McLean’s (2013) perspective resonates with this argument: they suggest that entrepreneurship can often be ill suited to indigenous contexts because of assumptions regarding economic rationality. As de Sousa (2012) argues, this does not mean that such types of knowledge may not be valuable in some way but it implies that entrepreneurship may not sufficiently embrace the alternative practices that enrich an entrepreneur’s cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986).

Second, the western understanding of the linearity of time in terms of thinking that history is following a development path of progress. This is particularly pertinent to entrepreneurship research through the lens of institutional theory, viewed as a central driver of poverty alleviation. Mair and Marti (2009) discuss how regulative, normative and cognitive institutions are developed to alleviate poverty; McMullen (2011) discusses ‘development entrepreneurship’ as a path to transforming markets; Kent and Dacin (2013) analyze how institutional logics changes in the microfinance sector, similarly to the change that Khavul and Bruton (2012) identify. Sautet (2013) similarly argues that appropriate institutions change the incentive structures for entrepreneurs. Khoury and Prasad (2015) adopt a similar stance on the importance of strong institutions for entrepreneurial development.

However, the pervasive use of institutional approaches in the literature has over simplified our explanations of the issue whilst also reducing the voice of individuals who live and work in such circumstances. This stream of research broadly suffers from a ‘transcendental institutionalism’ view. This critique, developed by Sen (2005), argues against the over-emphasis on institutions – the notion that if the ‘right’ institutions exist then development and poverty reduction will ensue. Indeed, Sen argues that we need to understand more closely how real worlds emerge, and are experienced and constructed by those that live within particular institutional arrangements. Such a view directly goes against *Universalist* thinking of how the necessary institutions will produce a path to development progress. This transcendental thinking is evident, we argue here, in our current understanding of entrepreneurship and poverty research. This produces an ethnocentric understanding of entrepreneurship, which seeks to mimic institutions and behaviors from developed to developing contexts. Thus, explaining the relationship between development and institutions outside of this explanation, entrepreneurship appears to be somewhat residual without an account for institutional complexity and their sometimes ‘odd’ outcomes (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2017).

Third, de Sousa (2012) refers to the ‘naturalization of differences’ which emphasizes how social classifications are created to legitimize hierarchies. This is apparent in entrepreneurship research because of its principal focus on the function of markets and therefore the successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurs that may enter and populate them. In particular, entrepreneurship scholars have positioned impoverished contexts as lacking innovation because of the prevalence of necessity entrepreneurship (Anokhin and Wincent, 2012; Sternberg and Wennekers, 2005; McMullen et al., 2008). This views such a type of entrepreneurship as inferior when there is nothing to suggest that such a type of entrepreneurship determines that it will be definitively different from any other (Anderson et al., 2013). This legitimation of classifications is similarly evident in the sphere of empowerment research which brings to the fore concerns around *othering* e.g. the black woman needs to be saved and empowered by the white woman through entrepreneurship; such classifications and entrepreneurial solutions are deemed ultimately more harmful than helpful (Cronin-Furman et al., 2017).

Fourth, refers to the assumptions of universalism in western knowledge that exclude local realities and contexts. In this view, those which do not conform to the dominance of modernity through globalization and markets are not viewed as a credible alternative. For de Sousa (2012), differing cultural traditions have varying notions of what constitutes a productive life in contrast to the capitalist notions of ‘development’. For example, the notion of Ubuntu in Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on togetherness, reciprocity,

interdependence and a restraint of self-interest (Mangaliso, 2001). The notion of the collective is consistent with *umuganda* which was critical for post genocide reconstruction in Rwanda (Gaynor, 2014). The Universalist's view is particularly apparent in Sautet's (2013) exposition of local and systemic entrepreneurship, whereby local entrepreneurship is viewed as something which stagnates economies. Indeed, the idea that local entrepreneurship must grow or scale thus producing more productive entrepreneurship in developing countries (and perhaps pick winners) so as to close the gap between entrepreneurship and economic development prevails in our domain (Pinillos and Reyes, 2011; Shane, 2009).

Lastly, de Sousa (2012) refers to the logic of productivity which underpins thinking in the global north. In particular, this view suggests that economic growth and progress are the main criteria through which 'progress' can be evaluated. This is particularly apparent in entrepreneurship research which places firm performance and their link with economic performance as a focal point of research (Bradley et al., 2012; Anokhin and Wincent, 2012). The earlier work of Sen (1999) has been most prominent in questioning this view; we should not be interested in the power of markets because of the economic outputs which may arise but because of the wider freedom it may engender. Sen's philosophy indicates a need to appreciate outcomes that vary according to valued beings and doings which can vary across persons.

## 5. Escaping the entrepreneurship iron cage: Towards a refreshed research agenda

Building on the theoretical critique of de Sousa (2012), we have suggested the mechanisms through which entrepreneurship research makes knowledge claims that can be exclusionary. Extant research follows a particularly ethnocentric perspective of entrepreneurship which, in the context of most non-western cultures, renders entrepreneurial behavior as oftentimes ignorant, residual, inferior, local or non-productive. By doing so, such an approach has retained enterprise-related activities as culturally captive, yet interestingly, enterprise refers not only to those units of economic organization (we are mostly familiar with), but can more broadly relate to any particularly difficult, complicated or risky undertaking, or even more to being ready to engage in an audacious or difficult action.

Given the critique outlined above, we argue here for a refreshed agenda for those of us interested in this space. In order to escape the entrepreneurship iron cage, we suggest that a position of cultural relativism would be beneficial for advancing research at the intersection of development and entrepreneurship. The logics espoused by de Sousa (2012) suggest that by not conducting entrepreneurship research with western assumptions in mind we portray 'the rest' as being absent of those qualities: "ignorant, backward, inferior, local or particular, and unproductive or sterile" (P.52).

Drawing on Renteln (1988), we suggest that there is an opportunity missing in entrepreneurship research, not only in the rather obvious recognition of cultural differences in thought, value, and action across (entrepreneurial) contexts, but also in the way in which entrepreneurship research makes evaluations or judgments about others. This requires paying particular attention not only to behavioral differences across contexts, but also to our perceptions of cultural phenomena. This means that the particular social and cognitive characteristics of entrepreneurship in a particular place need to be understood as culturally determined, and can only be observed and explained in recognition of cultural variability and never judged as superior or inferior than those shown in another place.

Our current form of inquiry and prescribing seems to still rely on the assumption that the way out of underdevelopment in non-western contexts is by embracing the liberal tradition as the best one available. Such as, changing values that are non-productive and are contrary to norms of success, repairing institutions that are inconsistent with market development, and naturalizing subcultures in line with western entrepreneurship standards. Not surprisingly, Stedman Jones' (2014) comprehensive discussion of the rise of neoliberal politics and more precisely of Hayek's work (which underlies the current view of entrepreneurial market process, as suggested by Kirzner, 1997) is called: *Masters of the Universe*. As George Monbiot elegantly puts it: "(currently) the market sounds like a natural system that might bear upon us equally, like gravity or atmospheric pressure."<sup>1</sup>

Perpetuating these ideas in entrepreneurship research blinds us from exploring unconventional, exciting possibilities and areas of inquiry. Let's take for example the explanation of poverty and entrepreneurship as related to the presence of individual deficiencies. In this explanation, successful movements away from poverty are explained through individual skills or lack thereof. Thus, the persistence of poverty can be understood by a lack of (entrepreneurial) talent or poor decision-making, where for instance, a failed investment of a micro-loan is down to an inability to plan (Bruton et al., 2011) and the repercussions for the entrepreneur are indebtedness and failure. This is clearly problematic because of its inherently punitive nature (Bradshaw, 2007). Moreover, if notions of progress and linear development are not universal, we are left to wonder whether this is an appropriate method for understanding entrepreneurial behavior in alternative contexts.

A position of cultural relativism in entrepreneurship research allows us to make a better use of alternative theories of development; to observe and analyze entrepreneurship in non-western contexts without undermining or alienating the observed behaviors. We suggest a need to understand the forms of knowledge that underpin entrepreneurial actions in addition to current notions of human capital and talent. For example, Kauanui et al. (2008) discuss the spiritually oriented attributes of entrepreneurs, whilst Dana (2009) discusses how religion reveals different patterns of willingness to become an entrepreneur. Whilst some insights of this form of knowledge do exist in the literature, it is very much on the periphery in entrepreneurship research. Yet, combined with the more conventional approach, it is likely to yield valuable insights for understanding entrepreneurial action in conditions of poverty. In particular, it provides insight into the fundamental set of individual drivers and values that concern the enhancement of freedom beyond markets (Sen, 1999).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.monbiot.com/2016/04/15/the-zombie-doctrine/>.

We do not intend to put forward a strong form of epistemological relativism, where everything is relative, even our own criticism. Cross-cultural universals can indeed be established, such as universal human rights (Nussbaum, 2001; Renteln, 1988). Borrowing from anthropology we argue that culture is a species-specific mode of adaptation (Spiro, 1986), so all cultures are a variant of a universal culture shared by all humans, e.g. the ideas of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, right to work and trade, which constitute substantive rights underlying enterprising behavior and activities.

In order to turn our proposition of cultural relativism into a productive research agenda for the field of entrepreneurship as related to development, we return to de Sousa (2012) “sociology of emergences”. We propose a framework (Table 1) portraying areas of research and related questions in five critical areas, reflecting the complexity of development (Bradshaw, 2007), namely: individual, cultural, individual, political-economic, geographical, and cumulative.

“The sociology of emergences consists in replacing the emptiness of the future according to linear time by a future of plural and concrete possibilities” (de Sousa, 2012: 54). It involves exploring alternative futures that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities. Such an approach enables us to enlarge current theories (and escape the iron cage) by adding to our existing realm of theorizing multiple possibilities, eventual tendencies and the future expectations it contains. It therefore involves undertaking a momentary symbolic enlargement of our current domain, i.e. our understanding of entrepreneurial behavior and forms of prescribing action, to identify therein the tendencies of the future beyond western borders. de Sousa (2012) explains that such symbolic enlargement is actually a form of sociological imagination, which acts both on possibilities and on capacities, thus on the potentiality of alternative futures and the potency of hidden causes. In other words, it is about wondering from a position of cultural relativism: What if entrepreneurship works differently in alternative contexts? What are the principles of action leading to those alternative forms or action (or even inaction)?

In our framework, we explore alternative tendencies in a speculative way, exploring possibilities and capacities around the aforementioned five areas, which entails accepting that things might happen differently or in unthinkable ways and understanding the eventual conditions leading to those possibilities. In cultural terms, for example, we can explore the possibility that productive entrepreneurship outside western borders may emerge in the absence of a ‘culture of entrepreneurship’ and social norms traditionally associated with it (possibility of emergence). This will necessarily lead us to wonder: how do entrepreneurs organize outside or in the absence of this subculture where it is assumed non-productive? (potency of emergence). Likewise, if we allow for the possibility that entrepreneurship can emerge in the absence of individual factors assumed to be critical, such as: agency, awareness, human capital, motivation and future orientation, or alternative forms thereof, it is imperative to ask ourselves how does entrepreneurship emerge propelled or shaped by spirituality, dogma or alternative forms of mystical knowledge?. Combined with our current understanding of the phenomenon, such a position can lead to developing a richer ecology of entrepreneurship knowledge.

While this may be true for scientific knowledge production in general, we argue that it is particularly central to the current state of entrepreneurship research. Entrepreneurship, as a field of research, has grown considerably in the past few years, both in breadth and depth (Wiklund et al., 2011). However, as Shepherd (2015) points out, we need to seriously rethink the next few years and avoid the potential competency trap resulting from our own success, as it may lead us to stagnation and losing what is special about the field. We argue that novel theorizing and real transformational research, particularly in the context of development where it is much needed, will only occur after dropping current (certainly unintended) power claims over alternative approaches to development and embracing relativity, possibilities and alternative capacities.

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