

Borders of immersive fieldwork - a methodological critique of entrepreneurship

Sakura Yamamura

Department of Geography, RWTH Aachen University, Aachen, Germany

Paul Lassalle 

Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

The International Journal of
Entrepreneurship and Innovation
1–10

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14657503221099437

journals.sagepub.com/home/iei



Abstract

Gerard McElwee's extensive research is characterised by his unconventional and yet strongly tangible topics in entrepreneurship, encompassing issues of illegality and criminality. In fact, beyond his published work, what has come up from discussions and interactions with him is his boundary-breaking approaches to the field itself, emphasising the collaborative nature of his research work. This contribution alludes to his unconventional and provocative approach to conducting research, crossing boundaries in qualitative research and extends his methodological critiques in entrepreneurship. We set out how the intentional crossing of borders in contrast to non-rigorous methodological mix-ups and empirical faults contributes to the actual innovation in knowledge accumulation and exploration of empirical fields. Giving some exemplary cases of our own empirical fieldworks, we illustrate the methodological, epistemological and systemic issues in entrepreneurship, and encourage more boundary-crossing and 'breaking out' of conventions - as entrepreneurs do to gain further market outreach - to enhance innovations in research as much as Ged has shown.

Keywords

methodological innovation, qualitative research, sociological theory in entrepreneurship, diversification, interdisciplinary research, contextual entrepreneurship

Introduction

When one looks at Professor Gerard McElwee's (henceforth Ged) extensive research profile, one clear element that strikes out is his dealing with unconventional, yet strongly tangible topics in entrepreneurship. The empirical field that he covers is extraordinarily broad, ranging from illegal entrepreneurship in rural areas (Smith and McElwee, 2013a; Somerville et al., 2015), to meat supply chains (McElwee et al., 2017) and migrant entrepreneurship (Lassalle and McElwee, 2016) to entrepreneurship in further diverse contexts (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; McElwee and Wood, 2017). What these publications, though different in the fieldworks, still have in common is both his boundary-breaking approaches and the focus on marginalised social groups, including issues around illegality and criminality. In fact, beyond his published work, what has come up from discussions and interactions with him is his unconventional and boundary-breaking approaches to the field itself. Not only has his research

been focussed on exploring peripheral zones within society, his independent and innovative - thus entrepreneurial - mind of his own has even more so been reflected in conversations and encounters with him as a researcher and human being. Such a path-breaking way of thinking and the courage to break with norms and conventions of the traditional research paths are what still inspires us, too, - as early career researchers, educators and human beings. Based on Ged's research practise and his teachings as a fellow researcher through conversations and discussions with him along with his publications on his fieldworks, we feel reassured and also been supported on our routes of (often) breaking with conventions and questioning the methodological boundaries within academia.

Corresponding author:

Paul Lassalle, Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship, University of Strathclyde, 199 Cathedral Street, Glasgow G4 0QU, UK.

Email: paul.lassalle@strath.ac.uk

In this paper, we outline what we interpret as Ged's core agenda in entrepreneurship, i.e. the critique on the quantitative turn, the methodological individualism and the systematic narrowing of entrepreneurship as a research field. These critiques that he has rightly voiced over his career both in writing and especially in speaking, are not mere criticism but also, as we understand and wholeheartedly agree and follow, very crucial approaches to entrepreneurship to be further developed. The reverse side of these critiques namely is the call for qualitative contextual research, for a sociology of entrepreneurship and finally for opening and diversifying methodologies, approaches and perspectives in entrepreneurship. By highlighting some of Ged's own works but also giving some exemplary cases of empirical fieldworks we have been individually and collaboratively conducting, we set out how these three contributions of Ged would be, if properly unfolded in entrepreneurship, pushing forward scholarship in the field of entrepreneurship. Especially the intentional crossing of methodological and topical borders is crucial to innovating thoughts and debates in entrepreneurship. In many cases, such mixing of methodological approaches can be misunderstood by researchers and/or reviewers and results in non-rigorous methodological mix-ups and empirical faults.

In entrepreneurship language, we encourage more boundary-crossing and 'breaking out' of conventions, as much as Ged has shown us, to gain further outreach on the market, i.e. to enhance innovations in research on entrepreneurship and bring more impact to other fields of social and business sciences. By sketching out the main cul-de-sac in entrepreneurship and reformulating the call for further novel approaches in entrepreneurship, we would like to contribute to the actual innovation in knowledge accumulation and exploration of empirical fields within entrepreneurship – as much as Ged has done so throughout his career.

In the following pages, we first build on Ged's words and work to criticise the prevalent positivist mindset in entrepreneurship research (even in qualitative research), call for the development of a sociology of entrepreneurship, and finally, advocate for a diversification of entrepreneurship scholarship with more synergetic relationships with adjacent disciplines.

Against the positivist and quantitative turn ...for qualitative contextual research

An interesting discussion with Ged occurred after a research seminar on qualitative methods in business studies. In that session, one of the authors of this paper presented their own reflections on conducting qualitative research. Somewhat typical of early career researcher's doubts and questions, it was asked how to write about the qualitative research process, and especially whether qualitative research could fit in a box at any time, meaning whether

there was a clear right or wrong of doing qualitative research (and whether it should). As naïve as these concerns may appear to experienced researchers, such are de facto existential crises for early career researchers and are even more prevalent for students who are approaching the empirical field for the first time on their own. On that day, among other early career and more senior colleagues, Ged was in the audience and started with a few provocative questions on methodological integrity in turn (with a sense of sarcasm and caustic humour that I did not fully understand at the time). Such questions can be destabilising. Indeed, the pressure to adopt a "clear" methodological stance, particularly those that enable the fastest route to publication (our academic currency) is very strong for early career scholars. Yet, with his questions, Ged was encouraging a more authentic analysis of our own practises, including in our choice of methodology. Put it briefly, he triggered further reflections on the actual mismatch between doing good research, engaging with topics and with data in the way a researcher would want to, and the actual publication game, where all should tick the boxes of "rigour", "validity", and "generalizability" (see also McElwee, 2022). Indeed, as seasoned researchers may not even realise anymore (although they still face rejections), publications, in the end, do not reflect the actual process of knowledge-accumulation and the results of rigorous empirical research, but more often the 'results', so to say, of the theorisation of the empirical studies which may, when written out for the academic audience and particularly the reviewers, reflect a different logic of research concept to adhere to the theoretical outcome rather than the original order of thoughts for the research output following the empirical study.

This brings us to the first section where we would like to question the norm and the dominant culture in entrepreneurship research. Although qualitative research is getting better established in entrepreneurship and receiving its duly respect (cf. Van Burg et al., 2022), there is still a notion that data collection and data analysis can be "right" or "wrong". Such a binary idea results from the positivist approaches dominant in hard sciences research but also in practise-oriented business studies. Indeed, the proximity to policy issues and the industry appears to create such peer pressure to deliver 'tangible' answers and clear-cut policy recommendations with ideal substantiation by key performance indicators or any quantifiable measures. Even with the increasing acceptance of qualitative research in business studies, misunderstandings of the ontological, epistemological but also practical qualitative methods are common among the academic communities (Dodd et al., 2021; Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte, 2014; McElwee, 2022). Such legitimacy slowly gained by qualitative researchers is still under the threat of positivist thinking, which now creeps into qualitative methods too, expecting "larger sample size", "generalizability", and looks for explanation and causal mechanisms. Simply put: the

quantitative turn in entrepreneurship that Ged has often critiqued in his writings (for example in; McElwee and Frith, 2008; McElwee and Holmes, 2000) and in conversations, and stands in stark contrast (if not: conflict) to the qualitative approaches that are necessary for grasping entrepreneurial phenomena and practises in empirical research.

Perhaps only very few entrepreneurship researchers in the mixed-methods and qualitative research field would ever consider themselves to have a positivist mindset. The term “positivism” has apparently become a red flag among qualitative researchers in general, an evil to deny with no exception and no excuse. However, in many cases, the dogma not to be a positivist *per se* is in fact stronger than the apprehension of the actual issue associated with it. Critique on positivism (Dodd et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2013) refers more to the epistemological order of thoughts and the logical thinking deriving from existing hypotheses, so assumptions of facts, and its respective verification or falsification. Such research concepts, where the results are already set out and thus become tautological in the theorisation, occur more than just seldomly. As a recent example, we were discussing a paper where categories of entrepreneurs were made a priori and hypotheses built on them. In that paper and explanations of the empirics, the author(s) discussed the existence of such and such entrepreneurial phenomena, claiming them *a posteriori* their cases. Moreover, as the empirics were based on qualitative research, at least so it was claimed. As a note, this even being more than dubious as at some other point of the paper, there were mentioning of “qualitative questions in the questionnaire”, which obviously does not qualify as native qualitative research. The claim was that the results were derived inductively. Now, qualitative researchers would easily realise this tautological process and the illogical and positivist argumentation. However, positivism is not a simple red flag to react allergic on, but a way of reasoning from a deductive perspective is something that many entrepreneurship scholars, who believe to be breaking with positivism only because they use qualitative information beyond numerical facts, appear not to fully comprehend. Breaking truly with the positivist understanding of data and methods appears still a challenge in business studies (Aguinis et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021). What we are pointing to here is the “closet” or most of the time unconscious positivist way of thinking by many scholars (including reviewers) in business and social sciences (sometimes even hiding behind the “critical realist” umbrella¹) rather than criticising positivist research itself (which is appropriate for many other sciences). Positivist way of thinking can appear to many as “more rigorous” even when conducting qualitative work, leading to misuse of terms (“moderating factors” for example) or questions about “sample size”. Many qualitative researchers would have heard or read such examples and agonised with the responses to such reviewers.

Beyond such faulty reasoning, there is indeed also still an assumption that data and methods can be right or wrong, and a consequential belief that some methods are right. Certainly, some methods are wrong, and some data, are neither useful nor usable - especially if not collected or analysed properly with necessary methodological rigour. But the positivist understanding of entrepreneurship (and more generally management sciences) leads to beliefs that whilst some methods are *right*, others should be dismissed, thereby reducing the methodological diversity of studies in the publication game. It is not rare to read an injunction, notably by reviewers, to use the *right data* and the *right method* (singular). The most problematic aspect of such institutionalised bias towards qualitative research is the lack of openness to other approaches, different methodologies and methods as many scholars have identified (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al., 2014; Smith and McElwee, 2013a; Steyaert, 2007). This is where we take Ged as an example where the borders between what is considered real data and non-data become questioned.

What Ged has demonstrated through his research portfolio is indeed that “real” research is also to get information that is “not officially” data (just as an example, the data collection from multiple sources on rogue-farmer in McElwee et al., 2017). As much as the world or society in general does not consist of black and white clarities, but rather shades of grey and further uncountable colours over a spectrum, entrepreneurship cannot be treated in such a positivist approach either. There has always been and will be an immersive blurry line of research material, and what is crucial for any research but particularly qualitative research is the rigorousness of the methodological approach itself. Ged’s engagement with the topic and his ability to “dirty his hands” (in Bourdieu’s sense) to uncover real stories of unconventional, yet everyday entrepreneurship, is far away from the official data quantitative researchers would take for granted. It often appears as if it were just a matter of numbers’ game, where it is not about the rigorous research itself but the tweaking of numbers to make the paper or presentation happen. Any statistician or quantitative researcher *would* know how to make numbers match the argument and “make” the desired results. The problem is that through the market and competitive game of publication (articles being the currency for researchers), there is an impoverishment of the methodology sections of each article with two consequences: either the papers are not based on rigorous research but do use all the necessary and expected keywords, or the authors do not have the space to present their approach, with their nuances, real limitations and the practical and theoretical solutions adopted to overcome them.

Indeed, following Ged’s own works, we question what is “data/knowledge” and what is not. As stereotypical it may appear, quantitative researchers too often do not acknowledge qualitative and non-quantifiable facts as “data”.

Consequently, numerous reviewers only acknowledge data that can be positively validated and reproduced, which is limiting the understanding of society. Apart from the institutional problem that decent qualitative research methods are rarely taught in business schools internationally, thus often even lacking the ability to criticise methodologies, we would like to point out the problematic approach of methodological individualism and the actual meaning of Ged's call for a sociological perspective in entrepreneurship (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al., 2014; McElwee and Holmes, 2000). Put into simple language: how to quantify issues that are *de jure* not existent in society? What we as researchers have engaged with are difficult or non-mainstream research streams, such as topics on illegality (McElwee et al., 2017; Smith and McElwee, 2013a), far-right movements (Lassalle and Naczyk, 2008), and multiple marginalised persons (Yamamura and Lassalle, 2021). If some entrepreneurs do not exist on paper and there are no statistics to be created, do they not exist at all? And more crucially: if they are not mainstream and not on the radar of mainstream research, are they less valuable to be researched, or even worse: are the data on them less reliable and less significant?

Ged has justly been contesting such quantitative turns in entrepreneurship and advocates for qualitative lenses to capture the depth of entrepreneurship beyond a heroic act (see also Clarke et al., 2014; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007). We would actually go even further with this notion by not only meaning the heroic narrative of entrepreneurship itself, as known in many business schools where the focus is on success stories, but also incorporating the heroic act of storey-making by entrepreneurship scholars to make it their own (research) success stories. Publication pressures (the so-called "publish or perish" as expressed by Smith et al., 2013) and focus on ABS rankings or "A" journals (Aguinis et al., 2020) can push scholars to twist the presentation of their methodologies, including of their research process in papers. That is interpreting "inductively" their results (read: freely with no comprehensible logic), to match the argument and theory, cherry-picking quotes here and there, both from interview materials and literature, to make the argumentative claim, instead of presenting the inductive process of theorisation. Such an approach is not maintainable from a truly qualitative and methodologically rigorous research perspective. The real research challenge is to understand the actual qualitative context (Lassalle and McElwee, 2016; Smith and McElwee, 2013b). Putting a notion of being heroic or not, correct or not, is judgemental and against the research moral. Qualitative research does not simply mean using non-numeric information, but to rigorously follow an inductive (or even an abductive) approach, analyse accordingly and discuss the emerging new facts from the results with no a priori facts to juxtapose them with for its validity.

Against methodological individualism ... for sociological approaches in entrepreneurship

The turn to a more sociological perspective, which is to understand and analyse the context rather than focussing on the otherwise individualistic view of entrepreneurship dominant in entrepreneurship, is another important perspective that Ged has brought into entrepreneurship (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al., 2014; Frith and McElwee, 2007). Warning against the individualistic view of entrepreneurship, he has stressed the methodological individualism in entrepreneurship, which brings us to the second agenda, the call for the sociology of entrepreneurship.

Methodological individualism in sociological terms means the methodological centring on the individuals rather than the societal contexts. Translated into entrepreneurship, it is the decontextualised focus on the individualistic view of entrepreneurship on the one hand, but also the managerial and mechanical approach to entrepreneurship on the other. What such an individualistic view entails is the narrowing of methodological approaches for the field of entrepreneurship and, with it, the doubt on more holistic and social constructivist approaches to the entrepreneurs. Whilst this individualistic view (both theoretical and methodologically) has been challenged, including by Ged and others (Anderson et al., 2012; Dodd et al., 2021; Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Lassalle and McElwee, 2016; Smith and McElwee, 2013a, 2013b; Somerville and McElwee, 2011), it still constitutes the main paradigm of most entrepreneurship journals.

As mentioned before, the social reality however is that of a grey zone, or (as we, as researchers working on diversity in entrepreneurship prefer) a "colourful spectrum". Entrepreneurship requires flexibility and an innovative stance of methods in business studies. In fact, pure number-making by pre-set hypotheses is not sufficient to capture the highly diversified and differential reality of entrepreneurship. We do not simply call for a purely anthropological approach to entrepreneurship, but more importantly, to integrate and accept (as migrant-led diversification and migration research has pointed out: it is not about assimilation but *integration*, inclusion or ideally even acceptance of) multi- and real mixed methods approaches. We consciously emphasise the "realness" of mixed methods here as we often observe authors claiming a survey with an open question to be a mixed-method approach of combining survey and qualitative research, or maintaining that a mixed method has been applied where simply a survey and topic-wise independent random interviews were conducted - which do not comply with a rigorous and thoroughly conceptualised mixed method research (Creswell and Clark, 2007). Such research concepts are *mixing up* methods rather than mixing methods, let alone using mixed-method approaches in the actual sense.

Such genuinely multi- and mixed methods in qualitative research are aligned with Ged's methodological approaches to data creation, that is the "immersion" in the research field. For example, in his work on the rogue farmers in the sheep supply chain (McElwee et al., 2017), Ged makes use of different methods to uncover the stories of the farmer (including documentary research), and establish contacts with various informants to re-construct the storey of criminal entrepreneurs. In his approach, which he calls a "picaresque tale" (McElwee et al., 2017: 170) rather than looking for a chronology, the data is everywhere and the researcher needs to be immersed. If there is fact-checking, there is also a strong reliance on narratives of different actors, once again, an inspiration taken from sociological fieldwork tradition including from Bourdieu, calling for the researcher to unroot oneself from the familiar world (Bourdieu, 1962). Narratives are not "taken for granted" (to paraphrase a reviewer) but constitute a crucial part of the storey. Stories matter in Ged's work (e.g.; Somerville et al., 2015) as "research can tell a good storey" (McElwee, 2022: 3), and do constitute relevant data. These can be generated through "traditional" interviews, but also through the collection of a breadth of data, from document analysis (McElwee et al., 2017) to interviews with other witnesses (including former policemen in rural areas for instance). Such data creation could be extended to fieldnotes, artefacts and videos (Drakopoulou-Dodd, 2014; Thompson and Byrne, 2022), internal notes from an organisation (Lassalle and Naczyk, 2008), photographs (Yamamura, 2021), and a wealth of informal exchanges with other actors and observations (Yamamura and Lassalle, 2020b). Data is not just written facts or audio transcripts of "semi-structured" interviews but also leads to innovative modes of theorising, including using metaphors (Clarke and Holt, 2017; Pattinson et al., 2020). It is the responsibility (and the competence) of the researcher to get immersed in a field, to listen, observe and *understand* it (Glaser, 1978).

Another aspect of such boundary-breaking qualitative research is that there is no "on/off" button in research. Following his sociological roots, Ged has been advocating "real" immersive research, to go full-on, and not just turn our research brain off when the recordings are off. There is a reason to interact further and continue with further observations, even officially after our work. We have done this with different fieldworks that we have conducted together, with one example being walking in the streets of Glasgow, entering restaurants, talking with the entrepreneurs or with business partners or community groups after a full day of site survey and interviews. Our understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon is informed by the broader context (for entrepreneurship and for the method), more than the interview, more than this or that excellent data. How to then use the data created from informal meetings is part of rigorous research awareness and

training in qualitative methods (cf. the sociologists Crozier and Friedberg, 1977 and in the work of Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). These data cannot be cited in quotation marks for papers but indeed inform the research of the contextual setting of the phenomenon. For example, fieldworks that we have done on LGBTIQ* entrepreneurs, definitely require immersion of the researchers within the field to generate trust (first of all), but also to appreciate the diversity and complexity of people's experiences. Most information cannot and will not be captured on record, given the sensitivity of the information (Browne, 2006) or the need for privacy by the participant.

Ged's call for sociological approaches goes beyond a simple methodological issue. Ged, as a sociologist of entrepreneurship, has been inspiring entrepreneurship researchers to refer to relational ontologies and sociological theories, borrowing from sociological classics, such as Bourdieu and Tönnies to explore, among others, stories of criminal entrepreneurs in rural contexts (e.g. Somerville et al., 2015). Interestingly, Ged is still using the entrepreneurial language and terminology of value extraction, income generation, and farm diversification even though it is for the analysis of "destructive criminal entrepreneurship" (e.g. McElwee et al., 2017; McElwee and Smith, 2012). Thus, whilst some of his work could appear quite "classic" in the entrepreneurial sense (exploration of motivation, barriers, etc.), they are often adapted to novel contexts and illustrate specific challenges and contexts of ignored populations (Lassalle and McElwee, 2016; McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; McElwee and Wood, 2017). As Ged's work demonstrates, references to relevant social theories can capture the relational, and uncover such contexts which account for the social construction and power structures in entrepreneurship activities and discourses. While the value of sociological perspectives has recently started to find its niche in entrepreneurship research, there is value in examining more issues of power, domination and violence and breaking with the supposedly "neutral" view of entrepreneurship purely as an individual act (Anderson et al., 2012).

Such more holistic but also differentiated view of entrepreneurship can be deduced from the establishing contextual entrepreneurship (Welter, 2011) or the call for particularly the spatial context of entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Trettin and Welter, 2011; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2020b). In fact, for engaging with entrepreneurship from a broader perspective, more inter- or transdisciplinary approaches are needed, with geographical or sociological approaches, as well as through engagement with the original theories of social sciences. The recent additions on Bourdieu in entrepreneurship (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Drakopoulou-Dodd et al., 2014; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021a), illustrate what going back to the theoretical origins can bring to entrepreneurship. Indeed, many sociological theories tend to be vernacularly

used in entrepreneurship, cherry-picking concepts as buzz words is a common phenomenon, if not symptomatic of social theories in entrepreneurship. Examples of such superficial engagement with social theories in entrepreneurship are reflected: in the singular usage of social capital and claiming it to be Bourdieusian (whereas Bourdieu's theory is unique and pivotal as it embeds different types of capital into their specific field, see Yamamura and Lassalle (2022); Bourdieu 1976, 1979; Robinson et al., 2021), the mere counting of ethnicities of entrepreneurs and claiming it to be superdiversity (whereas Vertovec's concept precisely criticises this groupist view and extends the diversity dimensions beyond ethnicity, see Yamamura and Lassalle (2020a); Vertovec, 2007) and in the limited adaptation of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory into entrepreneurship (often ignoring the important discourses on power issues and simultaneous multiple discrimination in social sciences) when a real engagement with intersectionality theory is needed (Essers et al., 2020; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021b; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2021).

As these few examples already show, the sociology of entrepreneurship that Ged has so much emphasised requires an even more so rigorous sociological methodological and theoretical approach. Only through the reference and integration of sociological theories can entrepreneurship contribute properly to the meaningful establishment of a sociology of entrepreneurship.

Against systematic limitation of entrepreneurship ...for diversification of entrepreneurial scholarship

The latter critique of the insufficient integration of sociological theory in entrepreneurship brings us to our third aspect for future development in entrepreneurship, namely what we would see as Ged's criticism of the systemic limitations of entrepreneurship research. Our take on this issue is to call for a diversification of entrepreneurship scholarship and more synergetic relationships with adjacent disciplines beyond business studies and sociology. For such aim, however, the system of the publication and review process appears to need an overhaul – a critique voiced often by Ged and for which his editorship of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* starting in 2000 has been substantial for the innovation in entrepreneurship (McElwee and Holmes, 2000).

As pointed out in the first section of this paper and elsewhere (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013), there is still normative pressure to deliver data, and not knowledge, in publications. A crucial role for this trend that goes beyond the focus on quantitative perspectives in entrepreneurship is lying in the review process. As much as the reviews are carried out by peers, the particular lack of teaching and training about research methods, especially

about empirical social research in business studies takes a toll on the quality of empirical works in publications (Dodd et al., 2021). With the systematic neglect of qualitative methods in business schools until recently (McDonald et al., 2015), where normally data-driven approaches dominate the discourse, researchers and simultaneously reviewers alike in entrepreneurship often miss an important critical review on methods, especially on the diversity of qualitative approaches. Uninformed reviewers often still focus on having data, even qualitative data coupled with specific databases, and do not acknowledge the process and performance of knowledge creation in the actual qualitative sense in empirical studies. Such ignorance towards qualitative research is adamant – speaking from the experience of reviewers' battles. For the ignorant reviewer, the random usage of methodological terminologies is not much more than bringing consistency to the language. The actual substantial problem and lack of methodology by the authors, however, is often ignored. This is evidenced by random usage of terms, such as interviewees, informants and respondents in the same empirical case. (For those who might have missed the Research Methods 101, there is indeed a qualitative and substantial difference between; anthropological approaches to extracting knowledge from informants, focussed patterns that can be identified by speaking to interviewees to the rather superficial Q&A on a questionnaire tick boxed by respondents).

This is indeed a systemic issue (Smith et al., 2013), not only about the institutional neglect of thoroughly teaching qualitative methods (Dodd et al., 2021) and bringing a holistic understanding of the fields to the empirical researchers. We also do see how the review process under time pressure and the little-to-no reward for reviewing, thus, the lack of available reviewer pools, is affecting the overall reviews. It is indeed easier as a reviewer to check on numbers and tables compared to engaging with the qualitative data and retrace the knowledge creation from interviews, which normally are only available in bits and pieces with selective quotes to underscore one's arguments. What is worse though is the increasing imposition of quantitative terminologies and approaches on interpretivist methods. The lingering "norm" of having a supposedly mixed method or cases with qualitative interviews that can be quantified (i.e. absolutely nonsense), we observe how survey respondents are suddenly transformed into interviewees, and – as if that was not stomach-churning enough, even leading to claims of having 125 "in-depth" interviews. The alert eyes are often missing, and a survey is being called a set of "in-depth interviews", an open question in a questionnaire becomes a "qualitative interview" and an oral survey a "semi-structured" interview. We do observe in our roles as reviewers how positivist approaches intrude the qualitative field by not bringing misused terminologies into manuscripts, but also "positivise" the way to explicate and present data. As we as social scientists know, such

“norms” are constructed by the culture in academia, and editorship is the key to monitoring such tendencies. This is where we would like to highly acknowledge Ged in his editorship. Ged’s courage to found an alternative journal is an entrepreneurial pioneer’s work in innovating a field such as entrepreneurship from its foundation. Such an act breaks with the prevalent norm and opens roads to be stepped for real innovation.

The well-known imbalance of the publication game in academia is systemic for sure. (What we mean by this is the illogic and absurdity of knowledge circulation with researchers submitting manuscripts, having them peer-reviewed and edited all *pro bono*, where publishers sell these results back to our institutions for millions so we can further publish on the basis of our own gratis works – this is quite a business model!). However, what can be influenced still on the academics’ side is how to deal with the shortage of pro bono reviewers and the time pressure, leading to very mixed review results as editors and authors would know. This is, as we believe, where good editorship can clear the way to adequately separate the wheat from the chaff. Ged as an academic has encouraged with his writings, and also during informal talks on how qualitative research can achieve real knowledge about the research fields (McElwee, 2022; Smith and McElwee, 2013a). Moreover, as the editor of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* he has allowed more openness to real research beyond the limitations of empirical evidence in many other high ranked journals. We are firmly convinced that it is for his highly valued editorship that many renowned authors are publishing in his journal, by doing so ignoring the ABS3 or 4 rankings, because the journal under his editorship allows and promoted openness in the voices of authors and the freedom of academia.

It is such a platform for new ideas and in that sense boundary-breaking thoughts and discourses that creates the scientific development of entrepreneurship. Such discourses then can truly lead to ground-breaking research in entrepreneurship. Ged has contributed substantially – as a researcher, editor and not least as the academic teacher he is – to such progress in entrepreneurship. He has shown to us all, with his rigorous and boundary-breaking research as much as with his editorship, how much qualitative research is needed to understand what is happening in society and, indeed, in entrepreneurship. The openness not only methodologically, but also to new thought experiments, new interdisciplinary approaches and new conceptual perspectives bring real change in research and society alike. Theoretically, we are aware of the importance of diversities in corporate contexts but also diversification in entrepreneurial strategies, yet such knowledge is ironically not yet reflected in entrepreneurship studies themselves.

As we had demonstrated in the context of global migration and entrepreneurship (Vershinina et al., 2021), the

topics surroundings the nexus of diversity and entrepreneurship are manifold if one takes a more holistic view on societal issues (Vershinina et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2017; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2021). For such a comprehensive perspective, as Ged has also emphasised and we demonstrate ourselves, the diversification of approaches to entrepreneurship, in other words: real interdisciplinary collaborations can bring substantial innovations in the knowledge creation in academia (see also Dodd et al., 2021). It is not only the mere citation of cross-disciplinary theories and usage of buzz words, as we had pointed out earlier, that make innovation. It is the genuine conceptual interweaving of other disciplinary perspectives, approaches and methods into solving intellectual puzzles of entrepreneurship. In our collaborative works, we have used geographical approaches of mapping in combination with ethnographical assessment methodology. However, how this methodological innovation allowed us to capture the sociology of entrepreneurship in its subtle differentiation is not the methods used but the actual conceptual incorporation of such approaches in understanding the diversity or diversities of entrepreneurship. Thus, the theoretical engagement with the content and context rather than simply parroting a buzz term or making claims on mixing (or messing) methods for the sake of mixing. Based on Ged’s insistence, or better, resistance to the systemic limitation of entrepreneurship as a discipline (McElwee and Holmes, 2000; Smith et al., 2013), we further call for the actual innovative potential of interdisciplinary works and the diversification, so to say, of strategies in tackling entrepreneurship – as we know is one of the key success factors in entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Taking an entrepreneurship language to conclude our paper, we summarise our arguments as a call for rigorous breakout and diversification strategies in entrepreneurship research.

Reflecting on Ged’s works, we could easily award him as the innovative entrepreneur in entrepreneurship. His studies demonstrate that he is an innovative (entrepreneurial) researcher, including in terms of methods and data creation. He broke with the common understanding of data creation in qualitative research in the field, which was previously too often limited to semi-structured interviews. We have already mentioned the immersive and ethnographic work that allowed him to picture stories of rogue farmers, criminal entrepreneurs and marauders (McElwee et al., 2017; Smith and McElwee, 2013a; Somerville et al., 2015). In his work and his words, Ged is calling for methodological innovation. Innovation of methodologies, however, is not for the sake of methodological innovations. Innovations that help to get closer to the phenomenon and to the people (McElwee, 2022). Innovation that would help create novel and original

data and capture the “social basis” of the entrepreneurs (e.g. Somerville and McElwee, 2011), making the basis for the sociology of entrepreneurship.

The academic system tells early career scholars to innovate and contribute fresh ideas and minds, but the reality of publication-hunting leads to compromising and restricting publishable methods and approaches. Such toxic culture risks not only vernacularly using methodological terms, but also empirically sticking to the good old comfort zone. Although it might not be the easiest road, as Ged has shown us with his research, there are not just potentials for the publication game, but real potentials of novel cognisant in going beyond the populous overstudied core and turn the sight to the periphery. The periphery of mainstream research topics, but also sociologically, turn to the marginalised social groups, the “peripherised” of society. The courage and support to venturing out to these areas are among the most important contributions of Ged – as a humanist, a researcher, a sociologist, a mentor and as an editor.

We do reinforce Ged’s approaches and would like to emphasise and encourage methods in entrepreneurship beyond “off the shelf” “good” methods. Diverse, different good methods and studies are not appreciated nor understood enough. The simplification of the systematic limitation of entrepreneurship is leaving options and closing down innovations. We ask: *where is the entrepreneurialism in knowledge production among entrepreneurship research?* If pre-set simplification of knowledge obtainment is being used, we know from entrepreneurship – both in theory and practise – that it becomes more difficult to have anything new, or the new will be “equalised” to the rest.

We do hope that Ged’s Freigeist spirit lives on in entrepreneurship beyond this Festschrift.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Rob Smith who has invited us to contribute to this contemplative Festschrift and hope we could also express our appreciation and admiration of Ged’s life work with our own interpretative piece. Our thoughts are with him.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Paul Lassalle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6063-8207>

Note

1. On such debates, see (Archer, 2016; Crankshaw, 2014; Cruickshank, 2004; Fletcher, 2017).

References

- Aguinis H, Cummings C, Ramani RS, et al. (2020) “An A is an A”: the new bottom line for valuing academic research. *Academy of Management Perspectives* 34(1): 135–154.
- Anderson AR, Drakopoulou Dodd S and Jack SL (2012) Entrepreneurship as connecting: some implications for theorising and practice. *Management Decision* 50(5): 958–971.
- Archer MS (2016) Reconstructing sociology: the critical realist approach. *Journal of Critical Realism* 15(4): 425–431.
- Bourdieu P (1962) C  libat et condition paysanne. *  tudes Rurales* 5(6): 32–135.
- Bourdieu P (1976) Les modes de domination. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*: 122–132.
- Bourdieu P (1979) *La Distinction : Critique Sociale du Jugement*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Browne K (2006) Challenging queer geographies. *Antipode* 38(5): 885–893.
- Clarke J and Holt R (2017) Imagery of ad-venture: understanding entrepreneurial identity through metaphor and drawing. *Journal of Business Venturing* 32(5): 476–497.
- Clarke J, Holt R and Blundel R (2014) Re-imagining the growth process: (co)-evolving metaphorical representations of entrepreneurial growth. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 26(3-4): 234–256.
- Crankshaw O (2014) Causal mechanisms, job search and the labour market spatial mismatch. *Journal of Critical Realism* 13(5): 498–519.
- Crenshaw K (1991) Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299.
- Creswell JW and Clark VLP (2007) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Crozier M and Friedberg E (1977) *L’acteur et le Syst  me: Les Contraintes de L’action Collective* [The actor and the system: the constraints of collective action]. Paris:   ditions du Seuil.
- Cruickshank J (2004) A tale of two ontologies: an immanent critique of critical realism. *The Sociological Review* 52(4): 567–585.
- De Clercq D and Voronov M (2009) Toward a practice perspective of entrepreneurship: entrepreneurial legitimacy as habitus. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship* 27(4): 395–419.
- Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (2011) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dodd S, Anderson A and Jack S (2021) “Let them not make me a stone”—repositioning entrepreneurship. *Journal of Small Business Management*: 1–29. doi:10.1080/00472778.2020.1867734
- Drakopoulou-Dodd S, McDonald S, McElwee G, et al. (2014) A bourdieuan analysis of qualitative authorship in entrepreneurship scholarship. *Journal of Small Business Management* 52(4): 633–654.
- Drakopoulou-Dodd SL (2014) Roots radical – place, power and practice in punk entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 26(1-2): 165–205.

- Drakopoulou Dodd S and Anderson AR (2007) Mumpsimus and the mything of the individualistic entrepreneur. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship* 25(4): 341–360.
- Essers C, Verduyn K and Kacar SO (2020) Opportunity structures from an intersectional perspective. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Minority Entrepreneurship*. Cham: Palgrave/MacMillan, 87–115.
- Fletcher AJ (2017) Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 20(2): 181–194.
- Frith K and McElwee G (2007) An emergent entrepreneur?: a story of a drug-dealer in a restricted entrepreneurial environment. *Society and Business Review* 2(3): 270–286.
- Glaser BG (1978) *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociological Press.
- Hlady-Rispal M and Jouison-Laffitte E (2014) Qualitative research methods and epistemological frameworks: a review of publication trends in entrepreneurship. *Journal of Small Business Management* 52(4): 594–614.
- Korsgaard S, Müller S and Tanvig HW (2015) Rural entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in the rural – between place and space. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 21(1): 5–26.
- Lassalle P and McElwee G (2016) Polish Entrepreneurs in glasgow and entrepreneurial opportunity structure. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 22(2): 260–281.
- Lassalle P and Naczyk M (2008) Both restless and conventional: polish far right youth movement Młodzież Wszepolska. In: BASEES annual conference. Cambridge.
- Lassalle P, Shaw E (2021a) Structuring the alternative weddings entrepreneurial field in France. In: Robinson S, Ernst J, Larsen K, et al. (eds) *Societal Change and Transforming Fields: Pierre Bourdieu in Studies of Organization and Management*. New York: Routledge, 195–216.
- Lassalle P and Shaw E (2021b) Trailing wives and constrained agency among women migrant entrepreneurs: an intersectional perspective. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 45(6): 1496–1521.
- McDonald S, Gan BC, Fraser SS, et al. (2015) A review of research methods in entrepreneurship 1985-2013. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*. doi:10.1108/IJEBR-02-2014-0021/full/html
- McElwee G (2022) Reflections on a career in entrepreneurship research. *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*: 14657503221083201. doi:10.1177/14657503221083201
- McElwee G and Al-Riyami R (2003) Women entrepreneurs in Oman: some barriers to success. *Career Development International*. doi:10.1108/13620430310505296/full/html
- McElwee G and Frith K (2008) The entrepreneurial wide boy. A modern morality tale. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* 6(1): 80–93.
- McElwee G and Holmes G (2000) Entrepreneurship: a theory full of holes. *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 1(1): –6.
- McElwee G and Smith R (2012) Classifying the strategic capability of farmers: a segmentation framework. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Venturing* 4(2): 111–131.
- McElwee G, Smith R and Lever J (2017) Illegal activity in the UK halal (sheep) supply chain: towards greater understanding. *Food Policy* 69: 166–175.
- McElwee G and Wood A (2017) Wetland entrepreneurs: diversity in diversification in Zambian farming. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 25(5): 752–768.
- Pattinson S, Ciesielska M, Preece D, et al. (2020) The “Tango Argentino”: a metaphor for understanding effectuation processes. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 29(3): 317–329.
- Robinson S, Ernst J, Larsen K, et al. (eds) (2021) *Societal Change and Transforming Fields: Pierre Bourdieu in Studies of Organization and Management*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Smith R and McElwee G (2013a) Confronting social constructions of rural criminality: a case story on ‘illegal pluriactivity’ in the farming community. *Sociologia Ruralis* 53(1): 112–134.
- Smith R and McElwee G (2013b) The embeddedness of illegal entrepreneurship in a closed ethnic community. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation* 11(1): 45–62.
- Smith R, McElwee G, McDonald S, et al. (2013) Qualitative entrepreneurship authorship: antecedents, processes and consequences. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 19(4): 364–386.
- Somerville P and McElwee G (2011) Situating community enterprise: a theoretical exploration. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 23(5-6): 317–330.
- Somerville P, Smith R and McElwee G (2015) The dark side of the rural idyll: stories of illegal/illicit economic activity in the UK countryside. *Journal of Rural Studies* 39: 219–228.
- Steyaert C (2007) Of course that is not the whole (toy) story: entrepreneurship and the cat’s cradle. *Journal of Business Venturing* 22(5): 733–751.
- Thompson NA and Byrne O (2022) Imagining futures: theorizing the practical knowledge of future-making. *Organization Studies* 43(2): 247–268.
- Trettin L and Welter F (2011) Challenges for spatially oriented entrepreneurship research. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 23(7-8): 575–602.
- Van Burg E, Cornelissen J, Stam W, et al. (2022) Advancing qualitative entrepreneurship research: leveraging methodological plurality for achieving scholarly impact. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 46(1): 3–20.
- Vershinina N, Rodgers P, Xheneti M, et al. (2021) Global migration, entrepreneurship and society: setting the new research agenda. In: *Global Migration, Entrepreneurship and Society*. Bingley (UK): Emerald Publishing Limited, 1–10.
- Vertovec S (2007) Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(6): 1024–1054.
- Welter F (2011) Contextualizing entrepreneurship—conceptual challenges and ways forward. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 35(1): 165–184.
- Welter F, Baker T, Audretsch DB, et al. (2017) Everyday entrepreneurship—a call for entrepreneurship research to embrace entrepreneurial diversity. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 41(3): 311–321.
- Yamamura S (2021) *Spatial Diversity in the Global City – Transnational Tokyo*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yamamura S, Lassalle P (2021) Notions and practices of differences: an epilogue on the diversity of entrepreneurship & migration. In: Vershinina N, et al. (eds) *Global Migration, Entrepreneurship*

- and Society*, Vol. 13. Bingley (UK): Emerald Publishing Limited, 195–212.
- Yamamura S and Lassalle P (2020a) Approximating entrepreneurial superdiversity: reconceptualizing the superdiversity debate in ethnic minority entrepreneurship. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(11): 2218–2239.
- Yamamura S and Lassalle P (2020b) Proximities and the emergence of regional industry: evidence of the liability of smallness in Malta. *European Planning Studies* 28(2): 380–399.
- Yamamura S and Lassalle P (2022) Extending mixed embeddedness to a multidimensional concept of transnational entrepreneurship. *Comparative Migration Studies* 10(1): 14.