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Positioning, Articulating, and Crafting Conceptual Articles on Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Conceptual articles are important for theory building but the special challenges of developing conceptual articles on entrepreneurship has not been fully considered. We begin to fill this gap by discussing the nature of conceptual articles on entrepreneurship, particularly those geared for publication in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*. We introduce three dimensions of the entrepreneurship discipline—uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity—and discuss how they can affect the positioning of conceptual articles and the articulation of their contribution. We also enumerate some basic principles for crafting good conceptual articles and present guidelines based on our discussion.

Keywords

entrepreneurship, conceptual articles, theory

Introduction

As entrepreneurship continues to grow as a field of study there are many opportunities to advance its concepts. More specifically, as theory is “the currency of our scholarly realm” (Corley & Gioia, 2011:12), entrepreneurship scholars must address perennial questions concerning what constitutes good theory and how it should be communicated to others (Whetten, 1989). Recently, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (ETP) started publishing occasional editorials on a variety of journal-related subjects, such as quantitative research (Maula & Stam, 2020), qualitative research (Van Burg et al. (2020)), and literature reviews (Rauch, 2020). However, none of these editorials focus on conceptual articles. For example, Shepherd and Wiklund (2020) recently offered a helpful list of rules, templates, and heuristics for writing articles for entrepreneurship journals but

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note that their recommendations are more appropriate for empirical articles using quantitative methods than for other types of articles, such as those that are conceptual in nature.

There have been a variety of prior efforts to discuss the content and crafting of conceptual articles that have appeared in other journals, particularly *Academy of Management Review*. For example, scholars have written on topics such as what constitutes a theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989; Reay & Whetten, 2011), how to build good theory (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017; Van de Ven, 1989), what theory is not (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995), how to enhance the value of theory (Kilduff, 2006), what makes a theory interesting (Davis, 1971; Salvato & Aldrich, 2012), construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010), and the crafting and positioning of a theoretical article (Barney, 2018a; Rindova, 2008; Smithey Fulmer, 2012). These works lead to several observations.

First, the “roadmap” for empirical articles is clearer than it is for conceptual articles. Indeed, since conceptual articles propose causal relationships among constructs without the data needed to analyze those relationships, the level of theoretical contribution of a conceptual article must exceed the theoretical contribution of an empirical article which, through its analysis of data can support, enhance, or refute the theoretical arguments that guide its development. Thus, making a theoretical contribution in a conceptual article is more difficult because the contribution is judged by how well the logic of the theorizing builds on and exceeds prior literature, without direct recourse to empirical evidence.

Second, conceptual articles offer considerable freedom to develop theories applicable to entrepreneurship without imposing the structure required in empirical articles or the broader generalizations often found in theories concerning large, mature organizations. Although this freedom is an important element of the academic road to discovery, it also introduces greater latitude to go astray. There is no simple “boilerplate” for the design of conceptual articles (Cornelissen, 2017; Lange & Pfarrer, 2017), especially in entrepreneurship, and this lack of structure can be misconstrued as freedom to be fuzzy. But nothing could be further from the truth, particularly in a discipline that takes pride in the ability to be relevant to practice.

Third, entrepreneurship has some unique features that distinguish it from other business disciplines such as management, and this adds to the complexity of writing conceptual articles in entrepreneurship. Indeed, entrepreneurship focuses on potential opportunities, the individuals who identify them, and the organizations they create or transform to exploit the opportunities they perceive to exist (cf. Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Accordingly, entrepreneurship is substantially different from other business disciplines, and the theories relevant to entrepreneurship must reflect that difference.

Given the lack of prior attention to writing conceptual articles specifically focusing on entrepreneurship in the literature, our intent is to fill the gap by discussing some issues regarding conceptual articles in the entrepreneurship field.¹ In this editorial, we contribute to the literature by (1) discussing the uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity of the entrepreneurship discipline; (2) explaining how these three features can affect the positioning of conceptual articles and the articulation of their contributions; and (3) providing some basic guidelines for crafting a good conceptual article in entrepreneurship. In this regard, we follow Shepherd and Suddaby (2017) in assuming that theory building is a craft that can be learned, applied, and improved through practice. We also conform to ETP’s broad boundary definition of the field of entrepreneurship (<http://journals.sagepub.com/aims-scope/ETP>). That definition includes: new venture creation, development, growth, and performance; characteristics, behaviors and types of entrepreneurs; small business management; family-owned businesses; corporate, social, and sustainable entrepreneurship; national and international studies of enterprise creation; and venture financing.

Entrepreneurship as a Research Discipline: Some Observations

As [Shane and Venkataraman \(2000\)](#) argued, entrepreneurship holds much promise as a field of research. However the field's uniqueness, broad ontological assumptions about relevant knowledge, and increasingly segmented research focuses, also introduce challenges. This section discusses the uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity of the entrepreneurship discipline, and the challenges and opportunities these features create for entrepreneurship scholars.

Uniqueness of Entrepreneurship

The *uniqueness* of entrepreneurship stems from the fact that the study of entrepreneurship primarily revolves around organizations, and the individuals associated with those organizations, at specific times in the organizational life cycle, that is, during their pre-start-up and early stages of development as well as during their renewal, as they attempt to identify and exploit new opportunities. Consequently, if the study of entrepreneurship is at all worthwhile it means that the factors that are important to entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms and interesting to scholars will be less important to non-entrepreneurs and firms that are not engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Entrepreneurship is multidisciplinary ([Gartner et al., 1992](#)) in that it *encompasses all* activities and functions of firms at particular stages of development, or in the case of family firms, all activities and functions of firms with a particular type of governance structure. By contrast, other fields that study organizations such as management deal with *specific* activities and functions of *all* organizations, focusing primarily on those that are large, mature, publicly traded, and bureaucratically governed. The challenge of making conceptual contributions to entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurship covers territory that is in large measure distinct from the territory covered by "mainstream" disciplines such as management, marketing, finance, economics, and sociology.

Relevance of Entrepreneurship

Relevance deals with the extent to which the theories used are applicable to knowledge about entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms and to the practice of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship scholars frequently borrow from theorists in other disciplines because these theories provide standards by which the behavior of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms can be compared. At the same time, there are continued calls for the field of entrepreneurship to "give back" to management and other mainstream research disciplines in business and closely allied fields such as sociology and psychology. However, the task of giving back is complicated because the subjects of entrepreneurship research are outside of the usual boundaries of studies in mainstream disciplines and possess attributes that are uniquely suited to their special status and stage of development. Put differently, business scholars draw attention to central tendencies in organizations, whereas entrepreneurship scholars must study types of organizations that by their very nature are at the tails of the distribution in terms of their activities and functions. What all this means is that conceptual articles on entrepreneurship by their very nature are unlikely to help explain problems facing organizations that are not entrepreneurial.

[Wiklund et al. \(2019\)](#) argue that increasing the relevance of entrepreneurship research is the field's grand challenge. [Corley and Gioia \(2011\)](#) suggest theoretical contributions can be defined on two dimensions: originality (incremental to revelatory) and utility (scientific to practical). The maturity of most business disciplines and the distance between business scholars and business practitioners suggests that most of the theoretical contributions in disciplines such as management are likely to be incremental and scientific. By contrast, owing to the relative newness of entrepreneurship as a field of study and its strong practical orientation, contributions in

entrepreneurship are more likely to be revelatory and practical. Given the importance of entrepreneurship to the economic and social development of the world, efforts to ensure that the conceptual articles published can be linked to major improvements in the practice of entrepreneurship is essential. For example, Zellweger and Kammerlander (2015) use agency theory to discuss how the installation of intermediary governance structures might mitigate or exacerbate agency costs in family firms, a topic which is highly relevant to family firms that wish to curb blockholder conflicts through family offices or family trusts.

Multiplicity of Entrepreneurship

We use the term *multiplicity* to refer to the presence of various sub-areas and research subjects in the entrepreneurship field. Over the years, a growing level of diversity within the entrepreneurship field can be observed even though the field is still relatively young. Dealing with so many types of entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial organizations, and the various functions they consist of and perform provides both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it fosters broad exploration. However, there continues to be struggles to come to grips with key conceptual issues as researchers focusing on different aspects of entrepreneurship sometimes fail to build on one another's contributions (Rauch et al., 2009). As the field has grown, the proliferation of theories has created two auxiliary issues: the increasing difficulty of establishing linkages among theories and the difficulty of testing the expanding body of theories. Clearly, neither entrepreneurs nor entrepreneurial firms are all the same. Some entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms might be vulnerable to the liability of newness (Stinchcombe, 1965) or characterized by family embeddedness (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003), while others may be created with high growth potential or even born to compete on a global scale (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). Some newly created firms are able to create and capture opportunities associated with the exploitation of new frontiers, while others, especially those that are family-controlled, may take the form of lifestyle businesses where the owners are satisfied with lower than average returns. Recently, the literature has also started to explore subjects that have received little prior attention such as individuals with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Yu et al., 2021). Some scholars even suggest that entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms might have more "outliers" than what we normally assume (Crawford et al., 2015), and studying these extreme outliers might have important implications for theory and practice (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2021; Nason et al., 2019).

Indeed, if the majority of entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms eventually fail, then a theory capturing the shared features of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms in general might not be capable of generating meaningful recommendations on how to develop high-growth, high-potential entrepreneurial firms. The presence of extreme outliers and the importance of these outliers exacerbate the divide between academic scholarship that focuses on testable generalities relevant to most of the population, and entrepreneurship practices that bestow huge rewards on a small group of highly performing newly created firms that accomplish what has rarely been accomplished before. The problem boils down to figuring out how much of the success of some entrepreneurs is based on doing things better and how much is based on doing things differently (Chrisman et al., 1998).

Positioning within Academic Conversations Relative to Entrepreneurship

In this section, we discuss the positioning of contributions of conceptual articles in entrepreneurship using the concepts of uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity (Table 1). ETP encourages conceptual articles that develop or extend theory relating to entrepreneurship, broadly defined. As such, there are several types of conceptual articles that can address challenges stemming from the

Table I. Uniqueness, Relevance, and Multiplicity in Entrepreneurship Studies.

	Uniqueness	Relevance	Multiplicity
Disciplinary Foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theoretical development unique for the entrepreneurship discipline and relevant to existing entrepreneurship literatures/theories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historically, entrepreneurship studies often borrow from mainstream management theories Theoretical development in entrepreneurship should primarily contribute to a better understanding of entrepreneurship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theoretical development addressing specific sub research areas, and/or research subjects in entrepreneurship
Positioning Types of conceptual articles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing new theory (special purpose or general) Developing a new concept Deconstructing an existing concept or causal relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapting existing management theory to entrepreneurship Synthesizing, expanding, or questioning management theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing new framework integrating multiple theoretical lenses Developing new classifications of different kinds of subjects or entities
Theoretical setting	<p>For a cause-effect relationship,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unique cause Unique effect Alternative mechanism(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurship as a context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focused sub-areas Level of focus and multi-level theorizing Integrating multiple theories
Articulating contribution Importance of theoretical contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fundamental concepts and inquires in entrepreneurship Creation of new and/or counter-intuitive knowledge Being proactive and interesting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grand challenge in entrepreneurship that existing management theories fail to explain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grand challenge in one specific sub-area Reconciliation of conflicting findings Practice-driven theory Presence and prevalence of “outliers” and under-studied groups of subjects
Importance to practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fundamental practical issues concerning entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial firms, communities, and society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grand challenge in entrepreneurial practice Business practices that can be used by entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practices unique to outliers and other under-studied groups Practices that help the average entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms become outliers with superior performances

uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity of the entrepreneurship discipline. We consider these types to be representative of most conceptual articles on entrepreneurship, but we make no claim that our list is collectively exhaustive or even mutually exclusive since some articles can encompass more than one type.

Conceptual Uniqueness: Development of Theory and Concepts

Theory development. The two most prevalent types of theory articles that appear in the literature seem to be those based on (1) special purpose theories or (2) new applications or extensions of existing theories that are more general in nature. As their name suggests, special purpose theories are designed to deal with specific research questions and have only limited utility in dealing with problems of a more general nature. Consequently, they often fade from view unless or until the particular research problem they were designed to deal with becomes more popular or more important to scholars and practitioners. By contrast, theory articles that propose new applications or extensions of general theories such as agency theory are more widely useful because they are designed to link to and enrich an existing body of work and may in fact have other applications. Furthermore, building on an existing theory provides a better foundation for a comprehensive understanding of phenomena relevant to entrepreneurship than special purpose theories. That may be one reason why articles linked to existing theory abound and are the kind of work that we most normally encounter as reviewers and editors.

A third type of theory article attempts to develop a new general theory. These articles are much less common. They are difficult to conceive and perhaps even more difficult to publish because they tend to challenge existing ways of thinking (cf. Kuhn, 1996). Of course, general theory articles that are published are likely to spawn numerous citations and many alternative approaches and refinements, some of which become the definitive works in the field. For example, just as Apple is synonymous with personal computers but did not develop the first machine of that type, Barney's (1991) work is synonymous with the resource-based view and Jensen and Meckling's (1976) work is synonymous with agency theory even though they were not the first to write theoretical articles on those subjects. Interestingly, both resource-based theory and agency theory can be placed among that class of theories known as theories of the firm. Theories of the firm attempt to answer questions about why firms exist and the limits to their scale and scope (Conner, 1991; Holmstrom & Tirole, 1989). Given that entrepreneurship deals with organizational creation and renewal, it is curious that, barring a few exceptions (e.g., Alvarez & Barney, 2004), efforts to construct a comparable theory of the entrepreneurial firm remain scarce.

Concept development. In addition to articles that develop theory, conceptual articles can also be designed to develop new concepts (e.g., effectuation) or new topics (e.g., crowdfunding) relevant to entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms that have previously been neglected. Such articles tend to focus more on questions pertaining to what, who, how, or where, but of course, often deal with the why questions upon which theorizing depends (Whetten, 1989).

In comparison, *deconstructing an existing concept* intends to alter prior conceptualizations of a known construct. For instance, by arguing that opportunities are made, not found, Ardichvili et al. (2003) and other scholars stimulate a meaningful dialogue regarding whether, how, and to what extent opportunities can be created rather than discovered through enacted entrepreneurial efforts that occur during entrepreneurial processes. Although deconstructing existing concepts can add value to the literature, care must be taken to avoid generating a profusion of interpretations for a concept. Such overabundance may ultimately hinder rather than help the advancement of theory because if a concept is interpreted in such a way that it explains everything, it may end up not explaining anything. For instance, entrepreneurial orientation (e.g., Covin & Wales, 2012) and corporate entrepreneurship (e.g., Sharma & Chrisman, 1999) seems to have several different meanings. This expands the scope of the concept but at the expense of common understanding and an ability to easily reconcile the findings of research that utilize the concept. This is especially unfortunate regarding entrepreneurial orientation since its popularity makes it one of the most likely building blocks for a general theory of entrepreneurship.

Conceptual Relevance: Adapting and Synthesizing Mainstream Theory

Aside from the handful of conceptual articles that attempt to develop a new general or specific theory about entrepreneurship, those that are likely to be most relevant either adapt management theories to an entrepreneurial context, or synthesize, extend, or question existing theories on entrepreneurship. To begin, *adapting mainstream theory to the entrepreneurial context* may generate novel insights if the theory can be adjusted to address a unique setting in entrepreneurship. In fact, there have been many articles that do this effectively and there are many management theories with the potential to provide insights into entrepreneurial behaviors, processes, and performance. For instance, the resource-based view of the firm initially developed within a strategic management context (Barney, 1991) is one of the many examples of theories from management or other disciplines that has been effectively adapted to the entrepreneurship field. The key for authors who wish to use management theories in an entrepreneurial setting is to identify the factors that differentiate entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms from managers and mature organizations. For example, Zahra (2021) has called for greater efforts in exploring the unique challenges and opportunities associated with resource acquisition and resource management in start-up firms.

Another type of conceptual article involves *synthesizing, expanding or questioning mainstream management theory*. For instance, Bruton (2010) offer an example of theory synthesis and expansion by addressing the topic of institutional theory and how it might be usefully applied to the study of entrepreneurship. They accomplish this by juxtaposing a review of existing literature along with articles in a special issue. Bruton (2010) provides an influential example of the importance of questioning existing theory when he argued that behavioral approaches to studying entrepreneurship were likely to be more fruitful than the trait approaches that were in vogue at the time his article was written.

The main challenges for these two types of articles are that, researchers need to show (1) why the original theory cannot be effectively applied to the entrepreneurship context; (2) why adaption or expansion is needed; and (3) to what extent the synthesis, adaption, or expansion of the original theory can yield insights that both are compatible with and go beyond existing theories in the entrepreneurship literature. As we noted before, contributing to a better understanding of entrepreneurship should be the primary focus for any conceptual article in entrepreneurship.

In addition, conceptual articles need to be mindful of the key issues facing entrepreneurs in their struggle to identify opportunities, find, and combine resources, and figure out the kind of strategy and organizational structure needed to launch a venture and make it successful. There is something to be said for theories that address the real problems entrepreneurs face and use language that entrepreneurs can understand. Although there may be nothing more practical than a good theory (Van de Ven, 1989), we also believe that there is no better basis for a theory than good practice, particularly in entrepreneurship where the outliers may be more important than the averages. Put differently, even though most of the conceptual articles published in ETP are designed to inform basic research, the best are likely to take from and give back to the practice of entrepreneurship. Thus, the key distinguishing features of conceptual articles that are relevant to practice are the extent to which they are embedded in practical problems facing entrepreneurs and the extent to which the articles directly or indirectly facilitate studies that address those problems.

Conceptual Multiplicity: Frameworks and Classifications

There are at least two types of conceptual articles that deal with multiplicity in entrepreneurship. First, articles that *develop a conceptual framework* are intended to provide a coherent map that integrates one or more theoretical lenses and shows relationships between relevant concepts. For

example, [Le Breton–Miller et al. \(2004\)](#) address the challenge of family business succession. Noting the fragmentation of the literature, they develop a more encompassing framework of the key elements of transgenerational succession. Likewise, [Shepherd and Gruber \(2021\)](#) present the five building blocks of a lean start-up framework which not only contributes to an understanding of how ventures are created but also has great practical utility for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Because a framework's main purpose is to provide a way to organize concepts, it is usually most useful when the dimensions or elements included are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Although the terms, "framework," "model," and "theory" are used interchangeably in the literature, for our discussion we distinguish among them. Frameworks are neither models nor theories per se although they can be used to develop either one. Thus, frameworks identify concepts that represent important characteristics or attributes associated with an entrepreneurial phenomenon. We distinguish them from models because frameworks only address the "what" question and do not make predictions about "how" the nature or level of the constructs that the concepts represent impact outcomes, while models do. Frameworks are distinct from theories because they do not (nor do models) explain "why" there is a relationship between concepts; theories do ([Whetten, 1989](#)). Nevertheless, while not as comprehensive as theories, frameworks and models can still be useful in promoting understanding, especially in topic areas where prior literature is sparse.

Classification schemes are closely related to frameworks except they are more often used to classify entities rather than the concepts that represent the characteristics or attributes those entities possess. Thus, conceptual articles that *develop a classification scheme* offers effective ways of categorizing various kinds of observations into an organized structure, which should also yield mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive, and internally homogeneous groupings. Classifications essentially provide structured definitions of entities and their relationships. Perhaps the most common kind of classification in the literature are referred to as typologies which are often conceptually derived.² Typologies are usually based on dimensions that characterize important attributes or ideal representations of the entity being classified.

Classification can be developed as single level schemes or can be constructed as a multilevel, hierarchal system. Most single level classifications are designed for a specific purpose and like special purpose theories, are not very useful beyond their special purpose. [Chrisman et al. \(1988\)](#) argue that hierarchical classification systems, which are more likely to be general in nature, are preferable, but these are relatively rare in the literature. Two examples of note are those of [Covin and Miles \(1999\)](#) who discuss different forms of corporate entrepreneurship and [Sharma and Chrisman \(1999\)](#) who discuss and reconcile existing definitions in the field of corporate entrepreneurship, relate corporate entrepreneurship to other forms of entrepreneurship, and classify different types of corporate venturing activities.

Overall, there are probably more opportunities to develop single level classifications for special purposes. For example, based on the sources of past knowledge and the type of product innovation, [De Massis et al. \(2016\)](#) develop a typological classification of four different types of innovation-through-tradition strategies in family business. As the field of entrepreneurship continues to evolve, the opportunities to develop new classifications will multiply. This will be particularly important in entrepreneurship because of the heterogeneity of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms and because of the need to better understand the populations we are dealing with so the findings of empirical research can be organized and generalized ([Chrisman et al., 1988](#); [McKelvey, 1982](#)). However, unless or until it is possible to reconcile and combine special purpose classification schemes into general classification systems, their individual and cumulative utility will be limited. A major opportunity in entrepreneurship is the development of a general-purpose classification system of entrepreneurial firms that can be linked to a general theory of the entrepreneurial firm that explains why they exist, the limits of their scale and scope, and the major sources of their heterogeneity.

Clarification of Research Settings

Given the diverse settings associated with the study of entrepreneurship, it is helpful to reduce confusion by clarifying the setting for theory development. The research setting must be in alignment with the type of conceptual article, the research topic, and the kind of theoretical contribution that authors intend to make. In this section, we discuss how uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity might individually and collectively affect the research setting of conceptual articles focusing on entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship scholars need to justify what is unique in their theorizing. Generally, scholars can argue that the conceptual article intends to focus on a new causal factor that few others have explored. Thus, an article on entrepreneurship can position itself as aiming to help us better understand unique, important yet neglected features associated with individual entrepreneurs, opportunity identification, organization creation or innovation, entrepreneurial strategies, or the context and conditions where entrepreneurship occurs. A similar argument can be made for a new end or outcome. Furthermore, instead of focusing on a new cause or a new effect, scholars can develop alternative explanations for cause-effect relationships that have already been studied in the literature.

Regarding the feature of *relevance*, as we explain above, entrepreneurship provides a context distinct from what would normally be encountered in large, mature, bureaucratic organizations. However, there are many theories from management and other disciplines that can be adapted for the study of entrepreneurship including agency theory, transaction cost theory, institutional theory, resource-based theory, prospect theory, and the theory of planned behavior. Ultimately, a good theory article (Barney, 2018b) specifies the theoretical conversation it is joining and clarifies whether it is extending existing theory or developing new theory. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the contribution to the entrepreneurship literature should be primary. An explanation of how the theoretical arguments capture the practical problems facing entrepreneurs and how research using the theory or concept will help address those problems in a way that is valuable to society, entrepreneurial firms, and/or entrepreneurs is also needed.

Given the high *multiplicity* of entrepreneurship in terms of sub-areas and subjects, scholars should clarify what they intend to focus on. In addition, entrepreneurship studies often deal with phenomenon at various levels, and this should also be clarified. For example, Sharma and Chrisman (1999) delineate levels of analysis relative to entrepreneurship: individuals/teams and organizations. Likewise, they identify two major settings: independent entrepreneurship (i.e., new ventures) and corporate entrepreneurship. By contrast, Johnson and Schaltegger (2020) conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a multilevel phenomenon connects social, environmental and economic dimensions. Similarly, Ruef and Lounsbury (2007) argue for a sociology of entrepreneurship perspective that focuses on the context, process, and effects of entrepreneurial behavior on society, similar to an institutional theory approach (e.g., Bruton et al., 2010; Webb et al., 2020). For example, work on topics such as regional advantage, institutional voids, and entrepreneurial ecosystems are providing the field with an institutional perspective that adds to our understanding of economic development, a topic that has been central to entrepreneurship for many years (e.g., Schumpeter, 1934).

Articulating Contributions to Entrepreneurship

Articulating a theoretical contribution is critical for a conceptual article even though not all conceptual articles build theory (Weick, 1995). As noted above, there exist many useful observations and insights regarding publishing theory articles in the management literature (Barney, 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Colquitt & George, 2011; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2021;

Delbridge & Fiss, 2013; Dubin, 1976, 1978; Grant & Pollock, 2011; Ragins, 2012; Reay & Whetten, 2011; Rindova, 2008; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017; Smith & Hitt, 2005; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995; Whetten, 1989). Below we discuss some points on how to make a theoretical contribution with a specific focus on entrepreneurship.

At its core, good theory identifies a problem, offers a solution, and ultimately helps to make sense of reality (Dubin, 1978). Whetten (1989: 494–495) offers seven useful questions for evaluating a theoretical contribution. In the context of entrepreneurship studies, these questions can be rephrased as (1) does the article make a significant contribution to either the entrepreneurship field overall or a specific sub-area in entrepreneurship? (2) is the theory likely to change or influence the research focus in the entrepreneurship field? (3) is the logic and evidence presented persuasive in explaining aspects of entrepreneurship? (4) is the article well thought out, complete, and thorough in the context of prior work on entrepreneurship? (5) is the article well-written? (6) is the subject of current interest to entrepreneurship scholars? and (7) does the subject have broad appeal to entrepreneurship scholars? Shepherd and Suddaby (2017) provide additional insights in their discussion of theory building according to the key elements of a story: conflict, character, setting, sequence, and plot and arc. Respectively, these elements describe aspects of conceptual articles that (a) deal with an important paradox, problem, or challenge in entrepreneurship; (b) are built around important core constructs in entrepreneurship; (c) can shift the setting to create new meaning for an existing construct in entrepreneurship; (d) incorporate time to establish boundary conditions for entrepreneurship theory; and (e) use disciplined imagination to add new insights to the entrepreneurship literature. Ultimately, what these authors seem to be saying is that articulating the contribution in a manner that is meaningful to the reader is just as important as the contribution itself and in fact is part of the contribution.

In entrepreneurship, the extent to which an article deals with issues of systematics, the study of differences between and among types of organizations (McKelvey, 1982), is particularly important. Entrepreneurial enterprises, or family enterprises, or small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are types of firms rather than aspects of firms (e.g., human resources, organization structure, strategy, etc.). Such firms are likely to encounter problems that do not exist in large or mature or nonfamily enterprises. Although studying organizational differences is important in every discipline in business and the social sciences, we believe it is even more important in entrepreneurship because the value of any work in the field is judged by how well it explains differences among entrepreneurial organizations, or among individual entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial teams, family businesses, SMEs, etc.

Although most of the work in entrepreneurship deals with differences among entrepreneurs and various kinds of entrepreneurial ventures, it is important to keep in mind that conceptual articles that focus on differentiating among factors that are unique to entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial organizations are likely to make more important and more interesting contributions to entrepreneurship theory than articles that compare entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial organizations along dimensions that are present in the same form or the same amount among non-entrepreneurs or large, mature organizations. Put differently, conceptual articles that focus on variations among new ventures, among family businesses, or among SMEs *still* should insure that the heterogeneous elements identified are in some way unique to entrepreneurial firms, broadly defined. Again, this is because elements that are heterogeneous among entrepreneurial firms, but not unique to entrepreneurial firms are really elements that are heterogeneous among all firms and are therefore less interesting and less important to the study of entrepreneurship. Therefore, in articulating the contribution of a conceptual article it is important to explain how the study is unique, relevant, and potentially heterogeneous in the context of entrepreneurship.

Importance of Theoretical Contribution

Researchers are typically challenged to justify the importance of their articles' theoretical contributions. As noted by Barney (2018b), a good conceptual article specifies a meaningful theoretical conversation it is joining, identifies a neglected gap, and further clarifies whether, how, and to what extent it is extending existing theory or developing new theory. While there are many ways to justify the importance of a theory or theoretical contribution, just saying "there are gaps" is not enough because there are many unexplored topics that do not advance knowledge about entrepreneurship. Below we discuss how to justify the importance of a theoretical contribution based on the dimensions of uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity.

When introducing the *uniqueness* of the study, an artful juxtaposition of prior knowledge and new knowledge about entrepreneurship is needed. One way to establish the uniqueness of a theory is to create one that is counterfactual to an existing theory. Davis (1971) refers to such theories as "interesting." Although being interesting cannot take the place of being important (Tihanyi, 2020), being interesting is itself important because interesting articles get noticed and get used. Thus, being interesting is a desirable property of conceptual articles, especially for a research field that is still rapidly growing such as entrepreneurship (Salvato & Aldrich, 2012; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017). According to Davis, to qualify as interesting, a theory must challenge conventional wisdom, by showing, for example, that concepts once thought to be stable are dynamic (e.g., evolution of rapid-growth firms, Fischer et al., 1998); once thought to be homogeneous are heterogeneous (e.g., family firms, Melin & Nordqvist, 2007); or once thought to be independent are dependent (e.g., embeddedness of the family system in entrepreneurial activities, Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). At the same time, it is important to avoid challenging so many assumptions from prior work that readers are left without a basis for incorporating the theory into their views of the world. For instance, Sarasvathy (2001) work on effectuation challenged long held views on how new ventures are started without denying that causation is also a viable means for new venture creation.

Journals want to publish work that is of fundamental importance and offers provocative, counter-intuitive insights. Such work is essential and potentially more possible in entrepreneurship because there is so much to be done. There is much we need to learn about core concepts such as opportunity (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), entrepreneurial mindsets (Kuratko et al., 2020), entrepreneurial behavior (Gartner, 1988), firm creation and evolution (Steier, 2009), economic development (Schumpeter, 1934), and new venture performance (Chrisman et al., 1998) separately and in combination. A theory of entrepreneurship that brings together these concepts is needed but most conceptual work focuses on rather narrow ideas. Such ideas are necessary but to apply Schumpeter's arguments about economic development to entrepreneurship theory, no matter how many narrow ideas we add together, we will not necessarily arrive at the broad theoretical perspective needed to consolidate and expand knowledge about entrepreneurship in a way that will move the field forward. Thus, a good conceptual article on entrepreneurship should deal with important and interesting issues that are relevant to the practice of entrepreneurship, but existing theories have thus far failed to explain.

Finally, regarding *multiplicity*, scholars have several options for justifying the importance of their theoretical contribution. For instance, it can be argued that the topic is important to a specific sub-area in entrepreneurship. In addition, scholars can integrate multiple theoretical lenses to reconcile diverging thoughts and conflicting findings. Similarly, a practice-driven theory built upon multiple lenses can be useful in generating prescriptive knowledge for entrepreneurship practitioners. Finally, conceptual articles that develop theory about outliers or under-studied groups offer much promise, as do conceptual articles that explicitly consider the temporal dimensions of entrepreneurship (Lévesque & Stephan, 2020).

Importance to Practice

Admittedly, generating big ideas is difficult and publishing big ideas is more difficult still. Bigger ideas have more weaknesses as well as strengths and garner more resistance because academics are trained to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths. However, while we await the emergence of a general theory of entrepreneurship (or family business), it is at least possible to ensure that our work is relevant to practice. This is not a call to forget about basic scholarship but it is a call to think more deeply about the value of our theorizing to practitioners. As its name implies, ETP is devoted to publishing articles with high theoretical and practical content.

In our view, conceptual articles can address practical challenges stemming from the *uniqueness* of entrepreneurship by providing prescriptive guidance on new activities for entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms, such that the process and practice of entrepreneurship can be made better. Similarly, conceptual articles may increase their *relevance* by generating better understanding of some fundamental practical issues concerning entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial firms, communities, and society, such as how new ventures can add to society's stock of wealth and institutional development (Bygrave & Minniti, 2000; Minniti & Bygrave, 1999), or how the noneconomic value added by venture creation or family involvement can be increased while holding economic value or wealth creation at least constant.

Finally, conceptual articles can address the challenge of *multiplicity* by studying practices that are only found among certain outliers or under-studied groups and theorizing how those practices might be utilized by other entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms. Hence, conceptual articles that generate meaningful prescriptions regarding how and why exceptional entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial firms are developed or how, why, and under what circumstances average entrepreneurs can be transformed into superior performers, can be highly important to practice. Of course, there are limits to what is possible. For example, as Barney and Mackey (2016) noted, resources that generate sustainable competitive advantage for some firms are, by definition, neither available nor valuable to all firms owing to the heterogeneity of resource bases and competitive contexts. However, it might be possible to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of most firms even though society rather than the firms themselves may turn out to be the primary beneficiary.

Crafting and Constructing Manuscripts

The logical presentation of new ideas is the cornerstone of good conceptual articles, but ideas are not theory (Rindova, 2008). Thus, in terms of contributing to theory, value creation resides in the ideas, but only to the extent that the ideas can yield novel insights and be sold to the audience. Many good ideas for new ventures fail because they do not present a value proposition in a form that resonates with the buyer. Similarly, in academia, good ideas can fail to gain traction simply because they are poorly articulated. Although there are no ironclad rules for writing conceptual articles, there are some common features of articles published in ETP and elsewhere that merit mention. To some, these factors may seem less important than the content of the theory, but to paraphrase Kirzner (1973), the selling of an idea is just as important as the idea itself and indeed, the two are inseparable because both are associated with the idea's value.

Clear Writing Style with a Coherent Story

Clear writing that tells a coherent story is the essence of a good publication. Clarity of expression matters, particularly for conceptual articles (Whetten, 1989) where the logic of the argument is of fundamental concern. Accomplished scholars are nearly unanimous that clarity is best accomplished through painstaking writing, multiple revisions, and friendly reviews (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2020).

Ragins (2012) surveyed the *Academy of Management Review's* editorial board and reviewers regarding their "pet peeves" and recommendations regarding manuscripts. She distilled their comments down to three peeves: (1) "Foggy Writing" that uses needlessly complex language; (2) "Read My Mind" styles that incorporate complex jargon without adequate explanation; and (3) "Story, Story, What's the Story?" articles that fail to introduce a "hook" or establish a coherent story line. There are many good suggestions for writing clear, persuasive, articles but in our experience the most important factors in communicating ideas is to set the article up with a good abstract and a good introduction and follow through on the momentum gained with a well-crafted article that delivers on its promised contribution.

Focused Abstract and Introduction

The reason why the abstract and introduction are so important should be obvious: they are the first parts of the article that is read, and they set the tone for the rest of the manuscript. If the abstract and introduction are done well, reviewers and editors will tackle the rest of the manuscript with relish and might even be willing to overlook some flaws if the topic is attractive and they believe they might learn something. On the other hand, if the abstract and introduction are poorly done, the manuscript is likely to be doomed no matter what merits might be contained in the remaining pages.

The abstract should succulently summarize what the article is about, why it is important, what the authors intend to accomplish in the article, and how the article contributes to the literature. In terms of the introduction, (Barney, 2018a) offers very specific advice that dovetails nicely with what should be contained in the abstract. Like a typical abstract that usually contains only 3-5 sentences, Barney recommends the introduction contain just three paragraphs. The first paragraph should specify the theoretical conversation one is joining and briefly discuss its essential features. The second paragraph should identify the unresolved theoretical issue to establish the need for the article. Finally, the third paragraph should state the purpose of the article, briefly describe how the purpose will be achieved, and the implications of the answers provided. In a similar vein, Grant and Pollock (2011) recognize the importance of the introduction, and use the analogy of "setting the hook" by addressing three sets of questions pertaining to: (1) why the topic is interesting and important; (2) what do we already know and what do we need to know about the topic; and (3) what important insights do we gain by addressing the topic?

Definitions

Defining the terms used in a conceptual article is very important because the thread of logic by which arguments are made hinge upon the concepts that are discussed. If it is not clear what the concepts represent it is difficult to convince readers that the theoretical relationships make sense. This is particularly important in relatively new fields such as entrepreneurship or family business where consensus on the meaning of key concepts has not yet been achieved.³ However, there are a few points that should be considered in defining terms.

First, unless the article is *about* definitions it is better to select an existing definition for a key term and use that definition throughout the article rather than to get in a long discussion about the various definitions discussed in the literature. Otherwise, there is a danger of diverting attention from the main arguments of the article. Likewise, unless the article deals with an entirely new set of concepts it is usually wise not to create a brand-new definition, which might need extensive justification, a task we have found over the years to be fraught with hazards.

Furthermore, if the focus is to develop a new concept, authors might want to differentiate its definition from similar concepts in the literature. For instance, when discussing the new field of

sustainable entrepreneurship, [Shepherd and Patzelt \(2011\)](#) explicitly elaborate what sustainable entrepreneurship is *not* by listing examples that do not fit their proposed definition. Similarly, if the intent is to deconstruct an existing concept, authors need to explain the theoretical limitations of prior theorizing, the theoretical foundation of the reconceptualization, and how the new definition and the new theorizing can generate contributions that go beyond existing studies (for a notable example, see [Dencker et al., 2021](#)).

In addition, the definition of key terms and concepts, especially those that are fundamental to the manuscript or underlie the theory, such as entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship, family business, etc. should be presented as early as possible. Even when the full usage of the term does not appear until later, readers are apt to expect key terms to be mentioned and defined in the introduction. In a related vein, if the manuscript defines many different terms that are new or unfamiliar or used in various ways in prior literature, it can make sense to provide a table summarizing those definitions (e.g., [Sharma & Chrisman, 1999](#)).

Finally, once the terms or concepts have been defined it is very important to ensure that the use of the terms or concepts is consistent with the definitions provided and that terms that are close substitutes are avoided (or at least are explicitly discussed and defined). Failing to use terms consistently or using terms with similar meanings interchangeably without mentioning their relationships can confuse the reader and could lead to the manuscript being rejected.

Boundaries and Assumptions

Owing to environmental complexity and bounded rationality every conceptual article ever written needs to make simplifying assumptions about the phenomenon being discussed. The need to make simplifying assumptions should be embraced rather than shunned because these assumptions helps in comprehending when, where, how and to what extent a theory is applicable. For example, agency theory assumes people are self-interested and stewardship theory assumes that people are other-interested. These assumptions are well-known. However, agency theory also assumes that information asymmetries exist between principals and agents. By contrast, stewardship theory implicitly assumes that information asymmetries do not exist or are trivial; without this assumption the idea that stewards naturally align their goals with those of principals would fall apart ([Chrisman, 2019](#)). The information assumption is well-understood in agency theory but is not well-understood in stewardship theory. The point is that authors should specify the major assumptions as completely as possible. Otherwise, the editor or reviewers may do it themselves, which may lead to confusion and unhappy outcomes.

Likewise, good conceptual articles need to set out the boundary conditions of the theory. Boundary conditions are similar to assumptions in that they explain the context in which the theory is expected to hold and, thus, also set the limits to the theory's generalizability. By specifying assumptions and boundaries, it should then be possible to understand the theoretical implications of relaxing the assumptions and boundaries. For example, [Chrisman et al. \(2014\)](#) formulated a series of propositions concerning the reasons and implications for the preference of family firms not to employ nonfamily managers based upon assumptions regarding family firm goals and boundary conditions concerning the size of the firm and the family. Subsequently, they were then able to discuss how relaxing those assumptions and boundaries would likely alter the relationships set out in the propositions.

Propositions

Many conceptual articles contain propositions, but whether conceptual articles need propositions depends on the nature of the article. As a rule of thumb, we would argue that to the extent that an

Table 2. Some Guidelines for Developing Conceptual Articles in Entrepreneurship.

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1. Leverage the uniqueness of entrepreneurship in your theorizing by focusing on factors that distinguish entrepreneurship and management rather than factors that do not
 2. Ensure that your theorizing is relevant to the understanding of entrepreneurship and the practice of entrepreneurship
 3. Acknowledge and incorporate relevant aspects of the heterogeneity of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial firms in your theorizing
 4. Remember that the more general the theory the more useful it will be for entrepreneurial research, but such work may also be more difficult to publish. Entrepreneurship and family business need their own variants of a theory of the firm
 5. Adapting mainstream theory to entrepreneurship is likely to be more useful than creating special purpose theories with limited applicability because it will be easier to link those theories with other adaptations and thus build a coherent body of work
 6. Attempting to develop a general classification of entrepreneurial firms will be more powerful than a special purpose classification because it can support a hierarchical classification and allow reconciliation of a wider array of knowledge
 7. To the extent possible, focus on the outliers and the variances among entrepreneurial firms rather than their central tendencies. This is especially important for prescriptive theory
 8. Be sure to clarify what aspect of entrepreneurship your theory deals with
 9. Make sure you focus on an important aspect of entrepreneurship
 10. Attempt to make your theory more interesting by emphasizing its counter-intuitive aspects
 11. Write clearly and coherently using language that is relevant to the entrepreneurship field
 12. Make sure your abstract and introduction convey why your study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature, i.e., why it is important and interesting
 13. Define your terms and make sure you use them consistently
 14. To the extent possible, document your assumptions and boundaries and consider how relaxing them might change your conclusions about the theoretical relationships under study
 15. Consider using propositions when they help better convey or summarize the relationships contained in your theory
-

article specifies the potential causal relationship between two or more constructs, propositions become more useful whereas when the purpose of the article is to map out a new conceptual territory, propositions may be premature and restrictive. For example, propositions are more useful for conceptual articles that develop models and theories than for conceptual articles that develop frameworks.

Overall, although there are few clear guidelines on when or when not to include propositions, we believe that if propositions can be formulated that effectively specify the relationships between the key independent and dependent concepts (not to mention moderating and mediating concepts), then they should be used because propositions (1) help summarize or map the key arguments of the article; (2) create formal statements that editors and reviewers can directly evaluate in terms of the article's theoretical focus, the reasonableness of key arguments, and the importance of the theoretical contribution; and (3) provide sets of arguments that researchers can directly test.

Conclusions

Entrepreneurship continues to have a bright future and there are many interesting phenomena yet to be studied under its broad rubric (Van Gelderen et al., 2021; Wright & Hitt, 2017). The aim of this article was to provide guidelines and reflections to assist scholars in developing conceptual

articles in entrepreneurship, especially for manuscripts submitted to *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*. We were inspired by the need for more good conceptual articles in entrepreneurship and the lack of attention that has been given to the topic. Our premise was that, along with being a creative act, the process of theory development includes sets of practices that can be learned even in a relatively young field where the state of theory development is somewhat in flux.

To summarize our arguments, [Table 2](#) offers some guidelines for developing conceptual articles in entrepreneurship. These guidelines may appear obvious, but experience has indicated they are frequently ignored. Our discussion and these guidelines are built upon three features of entrepreneurship (uniqueness, relevance, and multiplicity) that should be conveyed in the positioning of conceptual articles and the articulation of their contributions. We also discuss how to better craft and construct conceptual articles. In this regard, we have addressed the “duality” of good theoretical articles by suggesting that they must simultaneously exhibit creative aspects while conforming to some degree to the mechanistic framings of traditional academic writing. Overall, in our efforts to provide reflections on conceptual articles in entrepreneurship, we hope that we have also encouraged and enabled readers to be more reflective about their theorizing.

Author Contributions

Authors contributed equally and are listed alphabetically. The authors are grateful to Franz Kellermanns, James Vardaman, Johan Wiklund, Editor and Chief of ETP, and an anonymous review for their comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

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Notes

1. However, the content of this editorial represents the viewpoints of the authors and not the official policy of *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* concerning its requirements for publishing conceptual articles.
2. We do not discuss taxonomy in this article because taxonomy is the science of classification, including the theory and methods by which entities are identified and differentiated (Chrisman et al., 1988; McKelvey, 1982) rather than a type of classification as it has sometimes been depicted in the literature. Furthermore, we do not discuss empirically derived classifications because our focus is on conceptual articles not empirical articles.
3. We perhaps pick on entrepreneurship and family business unfairly since our experience suggests that the problem of definitions is common in the social sciences in general.

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