

INTERVIEW ACCEPTÉE PAR OLIVIER GERMAIN : (RE)LECTURES
DES OPPORTUNITÉS, FRAGMENTATION DU CHAMP ET
FONDEMENTS EMPIRIQUES DE L'ENTREPRENEURIAT WILLIAM B.
GARTNER INTERVIEW DU 26 FÉVRIER 2011

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Interview acceptée par Olivier GERMAIN : (Re)lectures des opportunités, fragmentation du champ et fondements empiriques de l'entrepreneuriat William B. GARTNER Interview du 26 février 2011

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Question 1) As a highly influential entrepreneurship scholar with more than 25 years of experience, you have helped launch large-scale empirical research programmes (e.g. PSED), pioneered new theoretical perspectives (e.g. the focus on behaviors rather than character traits), and also -- perhaps as a consequence of this -- actively engaged in debates and discussions of a more paradigmatic nature. In light of this wide-ranging experience, what is your own personal view of the history and current state of entrepreneurship as a field of research?

Question 2) Let's focus more narrowly on how to understand and study entrepreneurial action or behavior. As I see it, much of this research can be roughly organized under three headings that reflect broad research programmes in entrepreneurship studies, and also correspond to generic views of human action, viz.: the empiricism of behavioral approaches, the rationalism of cognitive approaches, and the interpretivism of discursive approaches (Berglund 2005). Again according to my interpretation, behavioral approaches tend to downplay the subjective meanings that actions have to individuals in favor of objective examinations of specific behaviors. Cognitive approaches seek to address intentionality and meaning by showing how different thought styles and knowledge structures, e.g. heuristics and biases, cause different behaviors. Discursive approaches explicitly probe the subjective meanings actions have to individuals by investigating how entrepreneurial actions and decisions are affected by more or less public narratives and discourses. Since you have contributed to all three programmes -- but especially to the behavioral and discursive ones -- I would like to get your comment on these traditions in terms of the validity of their respective knowledge claims, their value in terms of prescriptive implications, and whether you think they are fully complementary or in some ways incommensurable? One might for instance view the focus on cognitive biases as completely antithetical to the discursive view of entrepreneurship, not least with respect to the view of the subject.

Question 3) Relatedly, I would like to know what you think of the widespread idea that «entrepreneurial opportunities» should be the focal construct for entrepreneurship studies. My own view is that, as soon as one acknowledges that the future is truly uncertain, opportunities cannot not be meaningfully treated as objectively existing. This in no way mean that opportunities are not perceived as objectively existing by optimistic entrepreneurs. Indeed, entrepreneurs acting on heterogeneously imagined opportunities is probably an important cause of the (uncertain) future that comes to pass. However, this suggests that understanding entrepreneurial action under uncertainty -- which, referring back to the above taxonomy could include: tracking patterns of behavior,

measuring the influence of cognitive biases, and appreciating the roles of discourses and narratives -- is more important than understanding entrepreneurial opportunities (cf. Berglund 2007, Klein 2008). What is your take?

Response (WG): Thank you for this opportunity to both talk about my research and offer some thoughts about the nature of entrepreneurship scholarship. And, thank you for your questions. They have been really helpful in getting me to think about the nature of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship scholarship. I am going to bounce around in my responses to these three questions.

In terms of the history and state of the entrepreneurship field: A couple of thoughts. First, the entrepreneurship field has become more "self-referential." By "self-referential" I mean that scholars in the entrepreneurship area, now, tend to look within the body of literature that has been identified as the entrepreneurship literature, rather than to other scholarship. And, within the entrepreneurship field, scholars have tended to look at very narrow aspects of entrepreneurship scholarship, overall. So, for example, (and this point addresses an aspect of question 3), the entrepreneurship field has tended to consider entrepreneurship, as a phenomenon, as having to do with the nature of opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). As I have pointed out in the past (Gartner, 2001), the Shane and Venkataraman (2000) article is a key contribution to entrepreneurship scholarship, and, is worth using as an anchor for a broad line of important entrepreneurship questions. But, what has surprised me is how little effort has been undertaken by entrepreneurship scholars to connect a fairly large body of literature on the nature of opportunities that existed prior to Shane and Venkataraman (2000). In recent reviews of the nature of opportunities (*McMullen, Plummer & Acs, 2007 ; Plummer, Hayne & Godesiabois, 2007*) these reviews began with the Shane and Venkataraman (2000) article as the primary "ur" text on the topic. Yet, we pointed out in (Gartner, Shaver and Liao, 2008) that there is large body of empirical and theoretical work on opportunities in the strategic management area (*Denison, Dutton, Kahn & Hart, 1996; Dutton, 1990; Dutton & Ashford, 1990; Dutton, & Duncan, 1987; Dutton, Fahey & Narayanan, 1983; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Dutton, Stumpf & Wagner, 1990; Dutton, Walton & Abrahamson, 1989; Jackson, S. E., & Dutton, 1988*) that extends back nearly twenty years prior to the Shane and Venkataraman (2000) article. And, we (Gartner and Baker, 2010) have also pointed out that there is prior theory in the entrepreneurship literature on opportunity, (e.g., *Stevenson, 1983; Stevenson & Gumpert, 1985; Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990*) that has been ignored. I think this prior scholarship on opportunity could both enrich our sense of what opportunities are and reduce the need to reinvent some rather useful ideas that others have already offered.

I should mention that this problem of the "self-referential" construction of an academic field is not limited to entrepreneurship. I am very interested in the use of narrative ideas, approaches and methods to entrepreneurship scholarship, so, I tend to read a lot of scholarship in the narrative area. So, here is an article that appears in the *Academy of Management Review* (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) on the use of narrative to explore issues related to identity in work situations. First, it is really an excellent piece of work. But, my concern with the article is that it limits its recognition of "identity work" to scholarship from organization scholars. Yet, there is this rather significant body of scholarship, for example, in the medical field that looks at how identity transitions occur when people enter hospitals as "patients" or deal with chronic illness (e.g., *Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995; Kleinman, 1988*). So, the medical field has plenty of insights into how people grapple with the identity of "sick" versus "well" in hospital settings that could transfer into providing insights into the institutional aspects of a "work" identity. So, I read the Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) article and see so many missed opportunities to reach out to a broader range

of scholarship that provides both empirical and theoretical resources for their arguments. Maybe that isn't a significant loss. But, I suspect that most organization scholars won't go beyond Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) as their source for prior scholarship on narrative and work identity.

Now, to the second point I brought up about scholarship within the entrepreneurship field, itself, breaking down into narrow areas of interest. I hope that every entrepreneurship scholar has looked at the special issue on bibliographic methods in entrepreneurship in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (2006, Vol. 30, Issue 3). I believe the point we (Gartner, Davidsson & Zahra, 2006) tried to make with this special issue is that there are very identifiable groups within the community of entrepreneurship scholars, that, (as measured through citation patterns) have limited or no intellectual connections to the majority of other entrepreneurship scholars in the area. So, for example, the scholars studying venture capital tend pay attention to scholars studying venture capital and they do not pay attention to other entrepreneurship scholars who have made a number of insights into the kinds of individuals and organizations that get involved in the venture capital process. So, by and large, I suggest that there really isn't a "field" of entrepreneurship, per se, but a number of different groups of scholars looking at various aspects of different kinds of entrepreneurial phenomena. I'll return to this idea later for a bit more explanation.

Your second question is very insightful. It prompted me to consider what the "behavioral" label means as a focus of scholarship ontologically and methodologically. I had given some thought to this before (Gartner, 2008) and one of the points I made was that: my article championing a behavioral approach (Gartner, 1988), needs to be coupled with the four dimensional framework (Gartner, 1985) – environment, organization, person, process – that recognizes variation across all four dimensions of entrepreneurial phenomena. What didn't come across in Gartner (2008) was that at a deeper level, both articles are claims for a radical empirical focus on what entrepreneurship is. Let me clarify what this means. First, a quote from Arthur Conan Doyle through his mouth piece Sherlock Holmes: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." For me, what this means is that we must begin with facts about the phenomenon. And, typically, when we have some facts, it often shakes up our preconceptions of that we think the facts should have been. So, for example, a primary reason for my involvement in the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (see Gartner, Shaver, Carter & Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds & Curtin, 2009; Ruef, 2010 for information on the study and its overall findings) is that this data collection effort sought, primarily, to generate facts about how individuals attempted to start businesses. And, I believe, a lot of these facts should have challenged what we thought we knew about situations where people attempt to start businesses. For example, I recently attended a conference sponsored by the Atlanta Federal Reserve on the impact of financing on emerging and smaller businesses. The Federal Reserve is responsible for banking in the United States, and, one would assume, therefore, that people who work for the Federal Reserve would tend to think that money is an important part of people's lives. Well, as a matter of fact, in regards to whether money is a significant factor in whether people start businesses, the answer is often "No" (Gartner, Frid & Alexander, in press). When one looks at the empirical data in the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics, we find that 20 % of the individuals who are actively engaged in starting businesses don't use any money at all! And, in general, the median amount of funding that these nascent entrepreneurs use is about \$5,000. Not a lot of money. In terms of bank financing: nascent entrepreneurs rarely use bank financing, even when it is available. Or, we assume that entrepreneurs are likely to use funding from family and friends. Family and friends provide a miniscule amount of the funding entrepreneurs use to start their businesses. So, those are facts about an aspect of the phenomenon of "getting into business." Those facts are about the "what" and "how" of

the phenomenon. Those facts don't answer "why." Why don't entrepreneurs use bank financing? Why don't entrepreneur use funds from family and friends? Important questions to ask, but these questions should begin with some basis in the evidence. And, for bankers, who tend to have a theory that financial resources are a critical part of people's lives, these facts challenge their belief. Few of the bankers at the conference were willing to believe that access to financial resources is not likely to be a major factor in whether individuals are more likely to start businesses, or not.

So, using Sherlock Holmes as a metaphor for my research process: at the scene of the crime, we don't begin with "why" questions, we begin with "what" and "how" questions. We first need to establish the facts of the crime. Who was involved? When did this happen? What was the sequence of events? Once we get the "what" and "how" questions down, basically the evidence of the crime, then, we can begin to ask questions about motive "why," if there is enough evidence to point to the person who committed the crime.

The Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (PSED) was a crude attempt to provide a sense of the facts of the four dimensions I mentioned earlier – environment, organization, individual, process – in terms of how they present themselves across a generalizable sample of the population of all individuals trying to start businesses in the United States during a particular time period (1998 to 2005). I think the facts that were generated from the PSED provide a lot of insights that challenge what we tend to assume is "how entrepreneurs get into business." So, for example, Scott Shane's provocative work (Shane, 2008; 2009) offers challenges to what we think we know about entrepreneurship. And, some of Scott's evidence comes from the PSED.

So, the behavioral approach wasn't intended, I believe, to divorce itself from explanations as to "why" individuals undertook certain entrepreneurial actions. My focus was to insure that we had some sense of what the facts were before making assumptions as to the motives that might prompt these individuals to take those actions.

Frankly, I believe that most of us have some archetypal "entrepreneur" in our heads that we use to evaluate the truth or falsity of information we encounter about entrepreneurial phenomenon. When I ask people "who" they envision as a person who is an entrepreneur, and, what they envision this person doing; the responses I get are less likely to take into account the wide variation in kinds of entrepreneurs that actually exist. So, if I have an archetypal sense of a kind of entrepreneur, I would suspect then, that I also have a theory as to "why" that person acted in a certain way. The "why's" that I conjecture might be accurate or plausible for the archetypal entrepreneur I envision, but, those "why's" are unlikely to be accurate for all of the other entrepreneurs out there.

In terms of cognitive approaches to studying entrepreneurship, there tends to be a limited recognition of a broad array of ways that entrepreneurs might think about entrepreneurial activities. For example, Sarasavathy's work on effectuation (2001; 2008) is based, originally, on responses to an interview protocol that asked expert entrepreneurs to articulate how they would go about dealing with a specific entrepreneurial problem. These experts often, in her terminology, used an effectual approach. Yes, some expert entrepreneurs tend to use effectual approaches. And, many expert entrepreneurs do not. So, the value of a certain cognitive process needs to be grounded in the context of specific environments, organizations, individuals and behavioral processes. The cognitive literature in the entrepreneurship area tends to suggest that certain ways of thinking are more generalizable to individuals and their situations than I think the evidence would warrant. Be-that-as-it-may, I think that cognitive approaches can play a much stronger role in entrepreneurship scholarship. Though, again, my bias would be towards assuming that

entrepreneurs think in different ways, and, that what I would find interesting would be to describe the variety of cognitive approaches that entrepreneurs use.

I have an odd relationship with discursive views of entrepreneurial phenomenon. If I were to assume that I am the radical empiricist (James, 1978) I present myself as, then, the first troubling issue I have with entrepreneurship scholars, in general, is that we work with different fact patterns yet we tend to believe that our fact patterns are the same. I addressed this (Gartner, 2004) in an article that told the story of my problems with getting (Gartner, 1988) published. Reviewers tended to have an idea of what entrepreneurship meant to them, and, since many of these reviewers appeared to be unwilling to think about their own ideas of entrepreneurship, their reviews of my work reflected their own "unthinking." The Delphi process described in Gartner (1990) was my attempt to confront scholars in the entrepreneurship field with the realization that we all thought differently about what we thought entrepreneurship actually was. So, initially, I think my initiation into the community of entrepreneurship scholars, positioned me to appreciate the public narratives and discourses that, as scholars, we tended not to recognize.

The discursive approach is certainly important to my work, particularly in relationship to the third question on "entrepreneurial opportunities." If one were to look at the evidence in Shaver, Gartner, Crosby, Bakalarova, & Gatewood (2001) and Gartner, Shaver & Liao (2008), there are few indications that entrepreneurs actually talk about their situations in terms of "opportunities" (Gartner, Carter & Hills, 2003). The idea of "opportunity" is an intellectual construct that we, as academics, have about what we think an aspect of the phenomenon of entrepreneurship is. So, as academics we are now developing theory and conducting research on an idea that we've constructed as a way of thinking about what entrepreneurs are involved in. It is possible that, over time, our ideas about opportunity will disperse into the general population of every day language of entrepreneurs, just as I sense the idea of "competitive strategy" and the "five forces" (Porter, 1980) have become part of the everyday discourse in management. So, as individuals have inculcated themselves into Porter's view of strategy and the effects of specific environmental characteristics on firm behavior, the language of Porter becomes the language and thoughts that drive current managerial behavior. So by analogy, as the idea of opportunity becomes part of the discourse that academics use to talk to students, practitioners, and others about the phenomenon of entrepreneurship, then, in all likelihood, "opportunity" become more conscious and "real" as a fundamental property of what entrepreneurship "is."

I have great admiration for Chris Steyaert's article on the idea of "entrepreneurship" (Steyaert, 2007) because he emphasizes that the phenomenon we are looking at is more of a verb than a noun. So, the word "entrepreneurship" as a noun tends to stick in our minds, and be an object, something concrete, fixed and static. While "entrepreneurship" as a verb forces us to consider the phenomenon of entrepreneurship as fluid, changing and in-process. I like Karl Weick's work for the same reason. His book, "The Social Psychology of Organizing" (Weick, 1979) suggests, at the outset, that the phenomenon of organization is a verb, not a noun. Organizations are fluid, changing and in process. The word "opportunity:" a noun, is something concrete, fixed. And, then, given that opportunity is a noun, there needs to be a verb to provide action. So, entrepreneurs "discover" opportunities, or entrepreneurs "create" opportunities. In either case, the assumption begins with "opportunity" as something that "is." Again, for me, assuming that I'm a radical empiricist, the first question is: What is the fact pattern? What are the facts about what the phenomenon of what an opportunity is "is"? This is when the idea of opportunity, can, but doesn't have to, begin to fall apart. As I pointed out earlier, I think there is something worth considering when we conceptualize entrepreneurship as having to do with the nature of opportunities. I just hope that we are a bit more mindful (Langer, 1989) when we travel down this path.

(HB) Thank you for some very interesting and illuminating answers. Of course, they give rise to a whole range of new questions, but instead of asking them all, I will focus on the relationship between facts and theories and how one might go about “factually grounding” theories related to entrepreneurial action.

Speaking with Sherlock Holmes, you appear to argue for a radical empiricist approach to entrepreneurship where researchers should first lay bare the facts at hand (who did what and when) and only later, once this is done, move on to infer theories (why did they do as they did). I am a great fan of Arthur Conan Doyle and have often used the adventures of Sherlock Holmes when talking about methodology and theory of science. However, one of the paradoxes of such an approach is of course that in order to know what evidence to look for (or what aspects of entrepreneurial behavior to measure) one must rely on some other theory (Kuhn 1962). Holmes himself of course draws on rules of logic, familiarity with natural science, as well as a considerable measure of personal knowledge and experience when examining a crime. Thus not even Sherlock Holmes observes facts before developing theories.

I am probably reading too much into your Holmesian metaphor here – I sincerely doubt that you subscribe to such a “don’t theorize before the facts” empiricism. Nevertheless, the point that our facts and concepts are theory laden carries some important implications. Let’s take your case of entrepreneurs’ use of money and bank loans. Here the empirical observations (e.g. 20 % of entrepreneurs don’t use any money, the median amount of funding is USD5.000) are based on a certain conception of what an entrepreneur is – I assume it is something like “everyone in the process of starting new business”. Given this premise, a well-conducted study will produce correct facts in one sense. However, since such a conception of entrepreneurs is very broad, the results may still be misleading. Indeed, since there is great heterogeneity within the population of entrepreneurs (e.g. bio-tech start-ups requiring massive risk capital, v.s. more frugal lifestyle businesses), making statements about averages is quite problematic. This would indicate that more sophisticated theories (e.g. categorizations of entrepreneurs) should probably precede empirical investigations.

In fact, I wonder if such a broad and inclusive – and thereby ostensibly a-theoretical – conception of what an entrepreneur is, might not be just as misleading as an unfounded generalization based on a personally held perception of an archetypical entrepreneur. Not least if policy makers, who make decisions and craft plans, come to regard entrepreneurs as one homogeneous mass.

Nevertheless, I like the ambition to ground theories in facts. But I believe that the ambition towards radical empiricism is often best served by phenomenologically inspired methods, i.e. methods that take individuals’ lived experiences as their point of departure (cf. Berglund, 2007a). Not necessarily when trying to develop more fine-grained taxonomies of entrepreneurs, but when grappling with issues such as the “nature” of opportunities.

This is why – in my own modest contribution to the study of opportunities (Berglund, 2007b) – I wanted to move away from the debate over whether opportunities exist or are created, and instead analyze how a group of entrepreneurs in the turn-of-the-century mobile internet industry perceived opportunities. Paraphrasing Alfred Schütz, my basic assumption was that the answer to the question ‘What does opportunity mean for me the observer?’ would require as a prerequisite the answering of the quite different question ‘what does opportunity mean for the observed actor?’ What I found was that the entrepreneurs did not hold any homogeneous views of what opportunities were. Instead, when talking about opportunities, the entrepreneurs all spoke of a whole bundle of perceptions and projections which, in different ways and

in different situations, influenced the development of their ventures. This led me to question the focus on the ontology of opportunities and instead suggest a focus on how opportunity perceptions relate to entrepreneurial action.

Connecting back to what you wrote above, by exploring the phenomenology of entrepreneurial opportunities, I believe I did what you asked for. I posed and sought to answer the question: "What are the facts about what the phenomenon of what an opportunity is 'is'?" – if I managed to interpret your sentence correctly.

(WG) I think the heterogeneity – homogeneity issue in entrepreneurship is worth pointing out. I agree that a focus on the "average" of a particular characteristic of entrepreneurship is rather misleading. I would like to be attached to this aphorism: "There is no average in entrepreneurship" (Gartner, 2008). Averages and medians for such a heterogeneous phenomenon such as entrepreneurship is misleading. I use the example of 20 % of entrepreneurs (overall) using no money to start a business, and, a median investment of \$5,000 (overall) to challenge assumptions that getting into business requires a lot of money (and, for some, the assumption that unless entrepreneurs have access to capital, they are less likely to start businesses). Certainly some businesses do require a lot of money for startup. But, many others don't. The insight, I believe, is to pay attention to the kinds of entrepreneurs, the kinds of ventures, the kinds of startup processes, and the kinds of environments that foster entrepreneurial activity (Gartner, 1985). The focus, then, is on seeing variation in entrepreneurship, as one of entrepreneurship's fundamental characteristics (Gartner, 2008).

And, I think this issue is very easy to lose sight of. For example, a scholar might want to focus only on "high growth" entrepreneurs. I suggest that "high growth" entrepreneurs, as a category is in itself, heterogeneous. Indeed, the concept of "growth" is heterogeneous (Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner, 2003). There are many different ways that organizations can grow, and, indeed, there are many different ways to measure what growth "is." We tend to think that most organization "grow" organically, that is, through growth that occurs internally, through expansion of what the organization is already doing. But, in fact, most high growth organizations don't grow organically. For example, an organization can grow by purchasing other organizations. For those government policy makers who assume that supporting "high growth" organizations will result in greater overall employment, a "high growth" organization that purchases other companies as a way to grow isn't really generating, overall, many new net jobs. So, for me, this issue of "facts before theories" isn't to deny that we all bring with us, as observers, "theory" about what we believe about the phenomenon. It is rather that I worry that we don't pay enough attention to the fact that we do bring "theory" to our observations of the facts.

Indeed, one of the reasons that I started a new journal "ENTER: Entrepreneurial Narrative Theory Ethnomethodology and Reflexivity" (Go to <http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/pubs/enter/> to download a free copy of the first issue) was to emphasize, actually celebrate, the agendas that scholars bring to their observations of entrepreneurial phenomenon. The idea of ENTER is to have scholars explore the same text (in the first issue scholars focus on the book "The Republic of Tea") and to demonstrate that a particular entrepreneurial narrative provides a rich source of "facts" to use for applying a particular theory to that situation. This was my revelation in the special issue of Journal of Business Venturing on "The Toy Story" (Gartner, 2007): a specific entrepreneurial situation told in a specific way provides for broad array of theories to showcase a broad array of insights into the nature of entrepreneurship. I sense that we, as scholars, don't pay enough attention, to how our own biases and beliefs about entrepreneurship color our research findings and insights. I would like to bring our own beliefs and

perspectives more to the forefront of our research activities. Basically, bringing the “author” back into our authority as scholars.

And, yes, I agree with your phenomenological approach to exploring the ontology of opportunity. We tend to underestimate the struggle to make meaning out of experience, both as observers and actors.

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