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Book review: A research agenda for entrepreneurial cognition and intention

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Malin Brännback and Alan L. Carsrud, (eds), *A Research Agenda for Entrepreneurial Cognition and Intention*, Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018; 240 pp., ISBN: 978 1 78471 680 6, £81 (hbk).

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Let me start by declaring that the field of entrepreneurship studies is somewhat uncharted terrain for me, and I read this anthology primarily with the intention to become better acquainted with the sub-field of entrepreneurial cognition and intention. Writing this review was hence predominantly done with one question in my mind; did this anthology offer me a better insight into this sub-field of entrepreneurship studies? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, it offered me a preliminary overview of the most central on-going discussions, theoretical interests and unresolved questions within the field of entrepreneurial cognition and intention. While the underlying ambition of this field (and this book) might not seem overly complicated at first glance—to ‘advance our understanding of the cognitions that drive entrepreneurial activity’ (p.1), the chapters in this anthology reveal that this quest touches upon a very rich and seemingly limitless variety of topics.

After a relatively short introduction by the editors, the following two chapters give the reader a more detailed (and much appreciated) overview of the field of entrepreneurial intention. While chapter two offers a systematic overview of the central concepts, themes and researchers that have dominated and guided this field of research the last 20 years, chapter three digs deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of the field’s four decade long interest in the psychology, motivations and intentions of entrepreneurs. However, after these two “backdrop” chapters the reader is put on a very fragmented journey and presented with a series of chapters that investigate different areas and topics that somehow relate to entrepreneurial cognition and intention; e.g. cultural values and cultural practices (chapter 4), collective behaviour and norms in groups (chapter 5), the (complex) interplay between intention and behaviour/action (chapter 6), motivation (chapter 7), organizational culture and identity (chapter 9), learning (chapter 10) and language and linguistics (chapter 11).

While there is a certain form of excitement embedded in such diversity, this blend of different topics has its unfortunate downsides. First of all, with vague connecting dots between the chapters the reader is left with a very fragmented and incoherent picture of the research field.

The most obvious connecting dot seems to be—theoretically speaking—the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (see, e.g., Ajzen, 1991), which appears in some way or another in most of the chapters. Considering how central this theoretical framework seems to be, I greatly appreciated Schjoedt's (chapter 6) clarifying description of its central principles and shortcomings, and Mezei and Nikou's (chapter 8) important critique about its methodological weaknesses. However, the fact that TPB (an almost 30 year old theoretical framework) gets this much attention in a book aiming to 'take a more forward-looking approach' (p.1) is quite unfortunate, it unavoidably forces the reader to keep looking in the rear-view mirror instead of the road ahead. Secondly, while this anthology demonstrates the broad span of topics related to the field's main interest, this diversity comes at the cost of depth and thoroughness in the explorations and arguments made. This is especially the case in chapters that heavily borrow theories and insights from neighbouring fields, when the more nuanced complexities of these theories are often not paid attention to—even though Shaver and Carsrud warns about 'the danger of borrowing' (51) and 'the liability of oldness' (p. 52) in their chapter (3).

Let me now go back to my initial intention with reading this book, and clarify how it didn't manage to give me a better insight into this sub-field of entrepreneurship studies. This anthology is primarily written for active researchers within the field, and hence do not discuss or challenge the underlying premises of the field in any rigorous manner. The underlying idea of this field (and this anthology) seems to be—on a very general level—that '[a] thorough understanding of the process of entrepreneurship requires at least some—if not central—attention to the personal characteristics of the individual who perform the activities necessary to launch a new venture' (p.47), and the 'assumption that intentions are the most proximal and best predictor of behaviour' (p.117). But, after reading this book it is also very evident that this is in no way an unproblematic position, especially since research shows 'that intentions have very limited direct causal effect on behavior' (p.117). As Schjoedt (chapter 6) clearly points out; there are plenty of people who have intentions to act (entrepreneurially) but don't act, and people who don't have any intentions to act (entrepreneurially) but do. This somewhat ignored issue—about the complex and problematic interplay between intention/cognition and behaviour/performance/actions—casts unfortunately a big shadow over the field, something I had hoped and expected to be considered more rigorously. (Schjoedt's chapter (6) on implementation intentions, where he contends with this question head on, was hence a welcomed exception).

So, while this anthology on entrepreneurial cognition and intention offers an overview of the current topics, discussions and explorations within this field of research, the vague connecting dots between the chapters leave the reader with a somewhat fragmented and incoherent picture. The book also touches upon important questions that are central to the ambitions of the field, but leaves many of them largely unanswered (e.g., the interplay between intention and behaviour). Nevertheless, for researchers within this sub-field of entrepreneurship studies, and for other academics and practitioners that are interested in quasi-psychological studies of the person doing entrepreneurship, this book could be of value.

References

Ajzen I (1991) The Theory of Planned Behaviour. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes* 50(2): 179–211.