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Structure and agency in entrepreneurship research - An alternative research
framework

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the traditional and contemporary approaches towards conducting entrepreneurship research and emphasises the need for alternative research frameworks for future entrepreneurship research. The paper considers the implications of using different social theories to understand entrepreneurial issues at the rural community level. It particularly discusses on how to adopt 'Structuration theory' (Giddens, 1979, 1984) as an alternative framework for future entrepreneurship research. This proposed framework openly supports humanistic approaches to researching such entrepreneurial issues and in the clear recognition of the existence of multiple realities. It argues that proposed framework would expand the pluralist world of entrepreneurship research and particularly capable to see insights of 'power related issues' in establishing rural micro entrepreneurship, which is understandably difficult to research in positivist standpoint. The paper finally demands future entrepreneurship researchers to be more innovative and adopt alternative research frameworks within multiple reality ontology, instead of concentrating only the traditional positivist tradition of research within single ontology orientation.

1. Introduction

Ever since Schumpeter (1934)'s 'Theory of Economic Development', economists have viewed entrepreneurs as socially embedded and regarded them as a distinctive social class formed of people who were willing to bear the risks shifted into them by rest of the society. Also as a social elite possessing a distinctive psychology centred on rivalry and domination. Schumpeter (1934) drew attention to the role of the entrepreneur, as a catalyst in the markets of capitalist economies that revolved around innovation and economic progress. However, economists have become increasingly reluctant to venture into fields where knowledge of other disciplines, such as Sociology, Psychology, Politics and Anthropology is required to analyse different aspects of the 'firm'. They have limited their analysis only to the concepts of transaction cost, agency cost, capability or whatever, but not the concept of entrepreneur or entrepreneurship (Casson, 1999).

The recent changes and expansions in the world economy through the intersection of entrepreneurial and free markets revolutions attracted the attention for research on entrepreneurship. It has attracted the interest of academics and professionals as well as public policy makers as a purely empirical phenomenon (However it should be noted that the concepts of entrepreneurship had much earlier beginnings). Moreover, the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework for the field is beginning to emerge (e.g. Acs, Carlsson & Karlsson, 1999; Shane, 2002). These studies have been broad in their scope by extending the focus from the traditional functional areas of Management and Economics to broader cultural aspects and even to methodological issues associated with entrepreneurship research (e.g. Morrison, 2000). Further it has been seen that there is an emerging range of academic journals such as 'Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice' and 'The Journal of Entrepreneurship and Development'.

As Sexton and Landstrom (2000) have emphasised, this evolution of entrepreneurship as an academic field really began in the late 1970's and grew rapidly in the 1980's, as Courses, Centres and Chairs were developed and funded. In addition to this there has been a steady growth in research conferences and publication on entrepreneurship (e.g. Shane, 2002; Kent et. al. 1982).

The research streams in entrepreneurship have included a focus on the characteristics of the individual, firm and environment (Lee & Peterson, 2000; Shaver & Sott, 1991 etc.) emphasising entrepreneurial issues in four different perspectives; (1) Mainstream Economics, (2) Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Development, (3) Social Capital, and (4) Cultural development (Jayasinghe, 2003). In addition empirical research in entrepreneurship has broadened further and has attracted attention from several disciplinary standpoints such as Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology and Politics and as a result has been viewed in an interdisciplinary way.

Sexton & Landstrom (2000) pointed out that future entrepreneurship research needs to define the boundaries for entrepreneurship discipline, as it cannot be understood within the existing framework of scientific disciplines and the contributions of entrepreneurship research.

The overall objective of this paper is to examine the traditional and contemporary approaches towards conducting entrepreneurship research and critically emphasises the need for an alternative research framework for future entrepreneurship research. It considers the 'critical' framework of research for the analysis of entrepreneurial issues and particularly focuses on how to adopt 'Structuration theory'¹ to the future entrepreneurship research.

This paper is organised into four main sections and the issues of particular interests are; (1) problems of conventional methodology in entrepreneurship research, (2) selecting an alternative methodology, (3) characteristics of this alternative approach, and (4) conclusion of the report.

2. Problems of the conventional methodology

The main problem with conventional methodologies used in entrepreneurship research is their inability to address issues in unique locations such as regional and rural context, and failure to have an 'insight' view on entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial issues. The reason is most of the conventional methodologies in entrepreneurship research are more biased to philosophical assumptions and methods of classical positivist tradition of research (e.g. large scale surveys) which favours causal explanations of events and generalisation of research findings to larger populations (such as nations).

These conventional entrepreneurship studies assume functionalist² stand point and their findings will only be valid for static environmental conditions.

¹ Giddens's 'Structuration' theory explains the agency and social structure relationship and regards people as knowledgeable agents interacting with each other produce or reproduce their social life. The foundation concepts in Giddens' scheme are 'agency' and 'structure' and the interplay of these two leads to the process of Structuration (1979, 1984).

² Functionalism seeks to explain consequences of social structures, but it is not explaining causes of behaviours. It is interested in regulation of the society and organisations. Further it is trying to provide explanations for the status quo, why things stay the same in social order (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

They raise some significant methodological problems, when it deals with more complex entrepreneurial issues, particularly; the issues deal with more intrinsic behaviours of people and the issues in interdisciplinary nature. Hofer and Bygrave (1992), Higgins & Savoie (1995) and Hill & McGowan (1999) question the use of 'single ontology orientation'³ and the positivist tradition of research (which follows quantitative methods such as large-scale questionnaire surveys) used in entrepreneurship research. As human behaviour varies between times and places, they argue that the traditional contemporary deductive approaches to entrepreneurship research are not being able to address the nature and characteristics of enterprises and the insights of individuals who manage them.

According to the recent analysis of papers published in leading small business and entrepreneurship journals by Grant & Perren (2001), most research at the turn of the century was 'functionalist' in its orientation.

According to Burrell & Morgan (1979) 'functionalism' seeks to explain consequences of social structures, but it is not explaining causes of behaviours. Thus it is interested in regulation of the society and organisations and trying to provide explanations for the status quo, why things stay the same in social order. Grant & Perren (2001) have further found that most research in entrepreneurship is biased to positivist ontology and epistemology, and assumes deterministic human nature within its 'functionalist' framework and has shown only little evidence that follows other traditions of investigations. Here, the 'positivist ontology' is assumed the social world as external concrete structures and assumed that these structures are understood, affected and reacted by people in similar ways. Meanwhile, positivist epistemology assumes that in an empirical study researcher is independent of what is being researched. So, the researcher's role is to observe and measure social structures and its effects of changes.

³ Single ontology orientation concerns with objective statements or positivist accounts of what interests the researcher (Hill & McGowan (2002).

In line with these criticisms made by scholars, about the existing ontological assumptions adopted in the social science and entrepreneurship literature, this paper suggests that future research in entrepreneurship and SME development broadens perspectives by adopting a more interpretative tradition of research with qualitative approaches within this 'multiple reality ontology'⁴ (e.g. Epstein, 1962; Geertz, 1963; Firth, 1966; Morrison, 2000). In the 'interpretative' approach people are portrayed as constructing the social world, both through how they interpret the social world they live in and their actions that are based on those interpretations. Interpretations will reflect different cultures as people create different social worlds through their behaviour (Bulmer, 1977). Ontologically this tradition assumes, people are not passive and they simply respond to structures. Also it is believed that any form of social reality is socially constructed. Epistemologically, it assumes researcher's role is to understand people's interpretation of events rather the events themselves by discovering meaning rather than measurement by interacting with the subjects of the research.

Therefore by combining this interpretive tradition and its in-depth research programs into the context of entrepreneurship, future researchers will address many of its substantive issues, which can rarely be asked through quantitative methods and approaches. The special feature of this kind of qualitative research is that it can go beyond 'description' (answers to 'What' questions) by providing 'explanation' (answers to 'Why' and 'How' questions). For instance to study of entrepreneurs in a rural setting, it may be important to focus on the 'social constructs' in their minds and raises the question of 'why' it happened such a way. It may help to understand what entrepreneurship is, how the phenomenon occurs, and also to clarify existing conventional wisdoms about entrepreneurship (Gartner & Birley, 2002).

⁴ 'Multiple realities exist in any given situation. These are those of the researcher, those individual being investigated and reader or audience interpreting a study. The individuals construct their own realities as they interpret and perceive the world' (Hill & McGowan, 1999)

3. Selecting an alternative methodology

In the recent academic works of entrepreneurship researchers have responded to this methodological issue in different ways. Accordingly, some of them have already adopted some alternative research methodologies for their entrepreneurship research, such as in-depth longitudinal studies⁵, and ethnographic analysis within interpretative tradition of research (Table 1).

Table 1 - Alternative research methodologies in recent entrepreneurship Research

Name of the authors	Title	Methodology
Geertz (1963), Epstein (1962), Firth (1966), and Morrison (2000)	'Entrepreneurship: What triggers it', 'Malay fishermen: Their peasant economy', 'Peddlers and princes: Social development and economic change in two Indonesian towns', and 'Economic development and social change in South India'	'Longitudinal case studies' in different locations and 'ethnographic analysis'.
Kodithuwakku & Rosa (2002)	'The entrepreneurial process and economic success in constrained environment'	'unique quasi-experiment' of Sri Lanka villages' and used in-depth longitudinal case studies,
Jack & Anderson (2002)	'The effects of embeddedness on the entrepreneurial process'	Used 'Structuration theory' to explore how entrepreneurs recognise and manipulate aspects of their social situation in order to create and operate their business
Kisafalvi (2002)	'The entrepreneur's character, life issues, and strategic making: a field study'	A 'psychodynamic approach' to demonstrate how the emotional legacies of an entrepreneur' past influence the strategic orientations of the entrepreneurs from over 30 years time.
Dodd (2002)	'Metaphors and Meaning: a grounded cultural model of US entrepreneurship'	Analysis of metaphors about entrepreneurship that entrepreneurs offer when describing their lives and businesses (has used 24 sample articles for the analysis).

Source: Author

But, this researcher attempts to answer this methodological issue in entrepreneurship research in an alternative way.

⁵ 'Longitudinal studies' takes a relatively longer period of time (may be years) and there may be many periodic observations and analyses during this period. It attempts to study behavioural changes taken place during this long period of time.

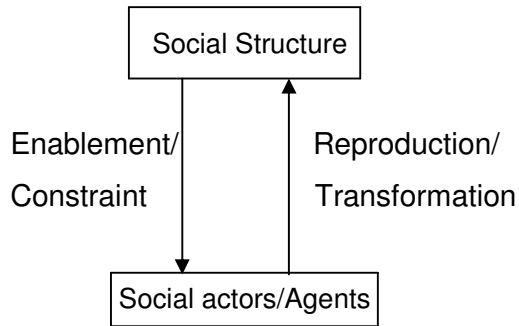
He assumes that selection of a particular methodology for a research should depend on the decision of the researchers on what assumptions and concepts they think are most appropriate for their studies.

According to Blaikie (2000) there are four traditions in the use of assumptions and concepts in the social sciences: the 'ontological', the 'operationalizing', the 'sensitising' and the 'hermeneutic'. The 'ontological' tradition of research is concerned with establishing a set of concepts that identify the basic features of the social reality, that are essential for understanding society, major social institutions or perhaps small scale situations, the 'operationalizing' tradition is concerned with specifying and measuring concepts to produce variables for a research project, the 'sensitizing' tradition with refining an initial flexible concept in the course of the research, and the 'hermeneutic' tradition with deriving concepts from lay language.

Classical theorists such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, as well as modern social theorists such as Parsons, Giddens (1979, 1984), Bhaskar (1986), and Blaikie (2000) have contributed to this ontological tradition of research. Especially, Giddens (1979, 1984) reorganised, and redefined some of the basic concepts used by other writers in this tradition and has developed the concept of 'Structuration'.

In the 'structuration' theory Giddens has made an attempt to overcome the one-sided nature of the traditional scientific approach in studying human behaviour in the society. He argues social scientists must focus upon the 'duality' of structures and agency (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Duality of Structures (Transformation of social activity)



Source: Adapted from Giddens (1979, 1984) and Bhaskar (1986)

He views the properties of social structures as both enabling and constraining human action and sees structure as both the medium and the outcome of social agency. Also, in 'duality' of this relationship Giddens assumed that people as knowledgeable agents interact with others in the society to produce/reproduce their social life. He emphasises that through being drawn upon by people, social structures shape and pattern those interactions of the people.

Also, as Bhaskar (1986) added these 'social structures' as 'transformational entities' bear following characteristics:

1. They do not exist independently of the activities they govern.
2. They do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activities.
3. They may be relatively enduring but still situated in a particular space and time.
4. They are reproduced and transformed through social agents who are in turn dependent upon the relationship between 'structure' and 'agency'.

Giddens in his 'Structuration theory' further explains that constitution of social structures can them selves be differentiated into structures of significance (meaning), legitimating (moral order) and power (domination).

Therefore the structuring of any particular context of interaction involves people drawing on and thereby reproducing these all three structures, and an interaction of social actors can be analysed in terms of these three fundamental elements (Giddens, 1976, p. 104). Further, in this 'structure of power/domination' (which is the central focus of this researcher's study) Giddens explains the operation of 'power relations' within the social structures. There, he employs the word 'power' in both broad and narrow sense. In the broad sense he explains that the analysis of power is inextricably tied to the actions of people (e.g. 'power to' do). In discussing 'power' in this sense he refers to what he calls the 'transformative capacity of human action' that is the power of human action to transform the social and material world. In the narrow sense Giddens uses the word power namely in the sense of 'power over' – in other words, power as the domination of some individuals by others.

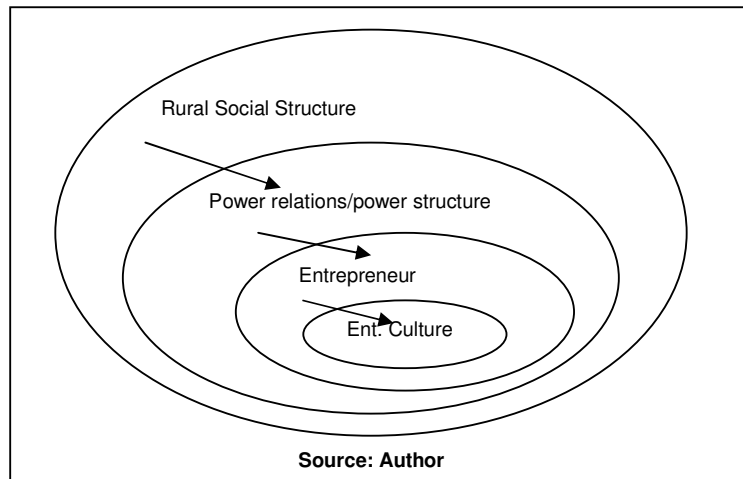
The Giddens' 'Structuration theory' and Bhaskar's philosophical contributions have already created a small but distinctive contribution to alternative methodologies in management research. Especially in Management Accounting research scholars such as Roberts & Scapens (1985), Richard & Boland (1996), Scapens & Macintosh (1996), Dirsmith, Hein & Covaeski (1997), and Baxter & Chua (2003) have applied 'Structuration' framework in their research and discussions, even though it is new to the entrepreneurship phenomenon. But one of the main features of entrepreneurship literature is the existence of 'social constructions' in its conceptualisation of research questions that are of interest to a scientific community at a given time (Bruyat & Julien, 2000). Therefore any form of understanding of these 'social constructs' needs to address the relationship between social structure and agency and needs to assume 'individual' as the producer of social reality.

Only recently, this 'Structuration theory' has been used to entrepreneurship research for the first time by Jack and Anderson (2002) in their study: 'The effects of embeddedness on the entrepreneurial process'. They used it in order to understand how entrepreneurs recognise and manipulate aspects of their social situation in order to create and operate their business.

In using Giddens theory they attempted to show how entrepreneurs are 'both' constrained within specific environments, and how entrepreneurs attempt to manipulate these constraints and profits from them. Their research focussed on seven established rural entrepreneurs who were studied over a 3-year period. Open-ended interviews with these entrepreneurs explored a variety of issues. The findings portray a context where personal and social relationships are an important platform for developing and exploring opportunities. The study describes the specific social factors that influence how these entrepreneurs realise the social dynamics of doing business in this rural community, and then how these entrepreneurs sought to change certain social factors to exploit opportunities they discovered because of this knowledge. Thus their study reinforces the point that entrepreneurship is evolutionary and interdependent and that the social context both constrains and enables entrepreneurs to pursue opportunities.

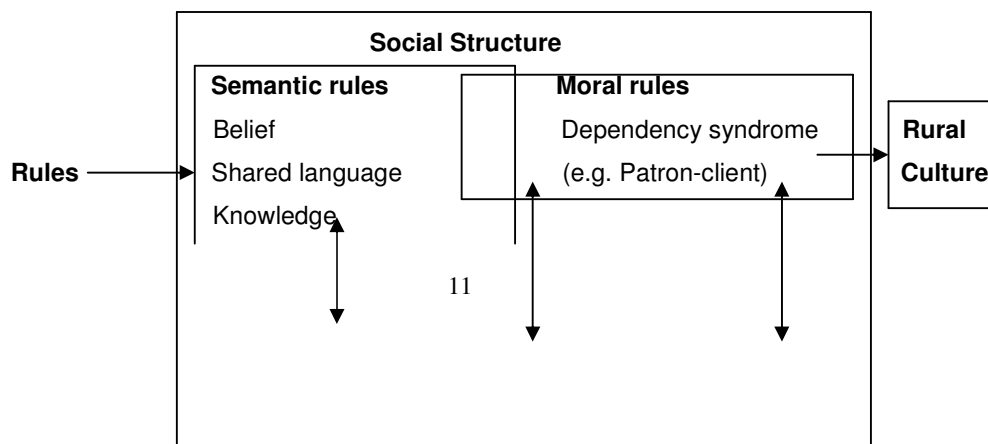
Also, this 'Structuration theory' could be used differently, and see how the power structures that are being implicated in the rural social structures effect the establishment of entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial culture within the rural community.

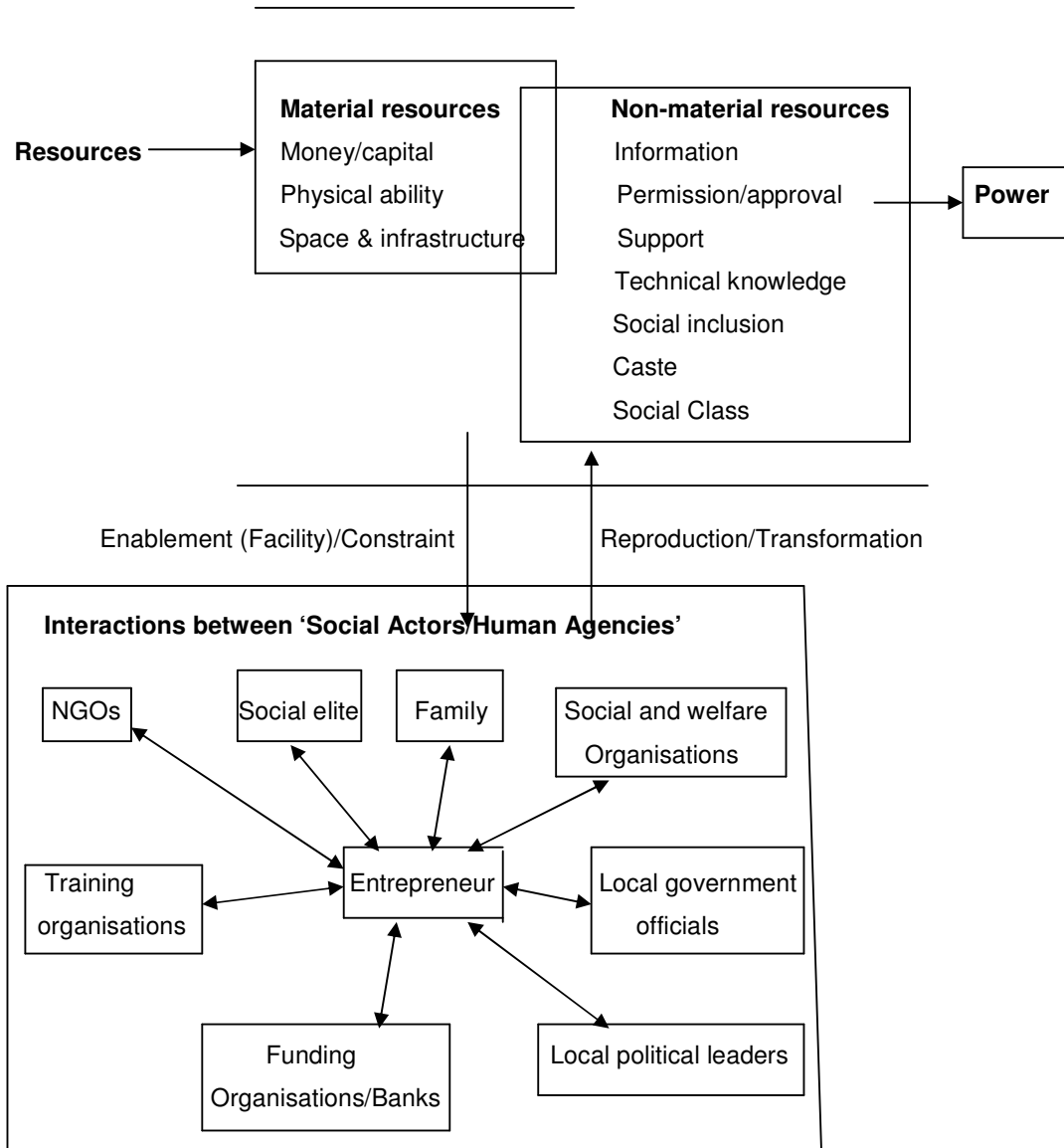
Figure 2 – Ontological assumptions could be used for future entrepreneurship studies



The Figure 2 shows the ontological assumptions for such a study and Figure 3 shows how the 'Structuration' theory could be used to study the rural social structure (existing rules and resources) and its interplay with the entrepreneurs and other social actors that interact with each other in the establishment process of entrepreneurship. It shows necessary relationships the entrepreneur maintains with other social actors such as his close family members, friends/relatives, bankers/other creditors, training institutions, Government officials, local political representatives and social elite in the community both in formal and informal manner in order to obtain material and nonmaterial resources such as physical support, place and other infrastructure facilities, capital/money, training and development, market contacts, and approval for implementation of his/her enterprise project.

Figure 3- Social actors in entrepreneurial environment and their Interplay with rural social structure'





Sources: Adapted from Giddens (1984), Gibb (1999), Rae (1999) and Blaikie (2000)

Also this framework helps to understand on how do the entrepreneurs as members of that society, being involved and established their close or distant power relationships with other members. It might make us sense on how some of those social actors in the community who occupy higher positions in this power structure (e.g. social elite) surely expect to maintain their existing power relationships and also how do they disadvantageously use their uneven positions, when they assisting entrepreneurs to their establishment process of entrepreneurship.

4. Characteristics of this alternative approach

4.1 Review of suggested approach

Such a study could mainly adopt interpretive tradition of research. So, ontologically it could accept existing 'multiple realities' and in an epistemological approach it recognises the importance of the minimisation of distance between the researcher and the research 'objects'.

Multiple reality ontology accepts that each individual constructs their own realities as they interpret and perceive their world and assumes research 'objects' as reflective agents. Ontologically, it is also assumed that the only reality is actually constructed by individuals involved in the research; (1) the researcher, (2) those individual being investigated and (3) reader or audience interpreting a study (Hill & McGowan, 1999). To represent the social world the researcher must 'represent' or 'reconstruct' the world as seen by others. These multiple realities may exist in any given situation.

4.2 Strategies and Methods of such a research

Given that this research is operating within the 'ontological' tradition that attempts to conceptualize the basic features of social reality, it could mainly deal with questions in explanatory nature ('How'). Such a study could adopt Case study as the main strategy of investigation. It will accommodate substantial in-depth interviewing of the existing and potential rural entrepreneurs. The in-depth interviewing is particularly appropriate in entrepreneurship research in that it enables the 'construction' of a 'holistic' picture of the experience of rural entrepreneurs and meanings he/she attaches to them. By considering the nature of some of its research questions ('what') it could also combine 'Questionnaire survey' strategy within the case study.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

For the critical analysis of empirical data of the case it could use social relations analysis, language, meaning, and cultural metaphor analysis and analysis of historical construction of social structures and recent transformations in the rural community (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Following the idea of Aristotle that 'poetry was truer than history' the single case study mainly concentrate analytic generalisation of its overall findings. It is believed that one learns from a particular applies to other similar situations subsequently encountered.

5. Conclusion

This paper has suggested an alternative research methodology to existing entrepreneurship research. It is focussed mainly on ontological tradition of research and the use of 'Structuration theory' approach for entrepreneurship research. The approach openly supports humanistic approaches to researching such entrepreneurial issues and in the clear recognition of the existence of multiple realities. It seems that proposed framework will expand the pluralist world of entrepreneurship research and particularly capable to see insights of 'power related issues' in establishing rural entrepreneurship, which is understandably difficult to research in positivist standpoint. Finally, the study demands future entrepreneurship researchers to be more innovative and adopt alternative research methodologies within multiple reality ontology, instead of concentrating only the traditional positivist tradition of research within single ontology orientation.

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