

RESEARCH SELF-EVALUATION

JONATHAN MARKS – JULY 2021

1. Overture

In the opening weeks of my doctoral studies at the University of Cape Town, a senior colleague handed me a copy of Karl Popper's *Conjectures and refutations* to read.¹ He suggested that at this early stage of my academic journey, an understanding of and appreciation for the epistemological roots of knowledge and the philosophical underpinning of research would be a valuable contribution to my studies. Popper's work may not have had immediate relevance to the narrow pursuit of a PhD, but his message was to carefully consider all theory – even that which enjoys the benefit of *proof* – before advancing one's own ideas. I took this to heart and it has remained a guiding belief through my academic work. We base much of our thinking on the work and theory of others but, as Popper suggested, even the sun rising tomorrow is based on nothing more spurious than the knowledge that it rose this morning. I regard the production of new knowledge through research as a critically important contribution and I hold Popper's world view as my intellectual North Star.

My identity as a researcher is a composite of my ontological and epistemological position, and the pursuit of knowledge, meaning, and understanding within the field of high-growth, high-impact entrepreneurship. I see knowledge from a constructivist or interpretivist position, and as a result see meaning in the world as something constructed through engagement with and in the world. This stance allows me to perceive myself as a social actor – as someone influenced by and influencing the very context within which I am conducting research. The domain of my research is at the confluence of large-scale systems, organisational effectiveness, and individual action and agency in the theoretical domain of entrepreneurship and located within a resource-constrained context. I view my research identity as being linked to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of what initiates and sustains entrepreneurial action and how these manifest in the world. My curiosity as a scholar and social scientist is associated with the belief that entrepreneurship is more than starting a business, it is an expression of personal idealism and identity. Beyond the world of necessity-based entrepreneurship present in small and micro enterprises is a much richer domain in which entrepreneurship can exist as a marker of human achievement. I bind myself to this view and, true to the interpretivist position, I see my growth and development as a researcher evolving with and as a result of my understanding of this context and domain.

2. Past research

My doctoral research sought to understand the qualitatively different conceptualisations of learning among South African university students engaged in a parallel programme of entrepreneurship development.² The research yielded a framework of learning engagement across a spectrum from surface to deep learning. More importantly, the research highlighted the broad inability of South African students to engage in reflective learning, which is indicative of the paucity of the past and current secondary education system. This challenged existing theory – particularly that of David Kolb and his much-used model of experiential learning.³ This model relies substantially on reflective ability to activate the cycle of learning from experience. My PhD research was presented at the European Entrepreneurship Education Conference and was nominated for the best paper award (I won the runner-up award in the final adjudication).⁴

This focus on learning and, more specifically, learning from lived experience, continued through research completed with a PhD student. This research helped highlight the spillover effects of entrepreneurship knowledge observed in Zimbabwean immigrants who implemented transnational

¹ Popper, K. (1963). *Conjectures and refutations*. Routledge.

² Marks, J. T. (2012). *Kolb interrupted: An investigation into students' experience of an experiential learning approach to entrepreneurship education* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Cape Town.

³ Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.

⁴ Marks, J. J. (2019, May 8–10). *Kolb interrupted: A phenomenographic study of experiential learning in entrepreneurship education* [Conference presentation]. 3E Conference – ECSB European Entrepreneurship Education Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden.

entrepreneurship.⁵ This work was accepted for publication in a special issue of the *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*. It built on a study completed some years before on behalf of the World Bank Institute,⁶ which detailed the role of diaspora networks in transnational entrepreneurship. The two studies are excellent examples of the manner in which my research is able to connect large-scale national and international systems into specific contexts as well as individual agency and action.

My case study,⁷ “Brownies and Downies: Coffee, culture and community: A social innovation that supports the intellectually disabled”, was a further example of this stream of work. The case study focused on a marginalised group (in this case, the intellectually disabled) and showed how social innovation can create a scalable mechanism for inclusion. It showed how the macro issue of marginalisation of a specific group could be addressed through entrepreneurial action.

Conscious that my research is contextually bound, my collaboration with Swartz and Amatucci yielded necessary insights that articulate how contextual embeddedness results in low levels of entrepreneurial behaviour among South Africans.⁸ A subset of this work that focused on women entrepreneurs was presented at the Academy of Management conference,⁹ while a draft of the final paper was presented at the United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship Conference.¹⁰ The research, conducted as a theoretical meta-study, drew important parallels between apartheid and South Africa’s Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity rate (a measure developed as part of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor study). This study was an important theoretical foundation for an invitation to co-author a journal editorial that examined the nature of venture support organisations in South Africa,¹¹ published in the *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*.

Looking once again at macro systems, I published research in 2020 that examined the emerging field of corporate social entrepreneurship.¹² This is a nascent field that melds traditional theories of corporate entrepreneurship with the work of corporate social investment.¹³ The research highlighted the difficulty that organisations experience as they attempt to align organisational and social goals during the grant-making process associated with corporate social entrepreneurship. The research resulted in the creation of an alignment model and suggested a hypothesis for advancing corporate social investment/corporate social entrepreneurship. This recent article was published following presentation of the early research at the 17th International Entrepreneurship Forum Conference in December 2018.¹⁴

⁵ Marks, J., Dawa, S., & Kanyemba, S. (2020). Transnational entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa: An absorptive capacity theory of knowledge spillover entrepreneurship perspective. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*, 6(1), 114–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2393957519895851>

⁶ Marks, J. (2006). South Africa: Evolving diaspora, promising initiatives. In Y. Kuznetsov (Ed.), *Diaspora networks and the international migration of skills: How countries can draw on their talent abroad* (pp. 171–186). The World Bank.

⁷ Marks, J. T., & Hidden, K. (2018). Brownies & Downies: Coffee, culture and community: A social innovation that supports the intellectually disabled. *Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EEMCS-12-2016-0220>

⁸ Swartz, E. M., Amatucci, F. M., & Marks, J. T. (2019). Contextual embeddedness as a framework: The case of entrepreneurship in South Africa. *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship*, 24(3), Article 1950018. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1084946719500183>

⁹ Scheepers, C., Marks, J. T., Sjöblom, L., Christo-Baker, E. A., Swartz, E., & Ruoro, A. (2018, August 10–14). *Women entrepreneurship challenges in Africa: From an African perspective* [Paper presentation]. Professional Development Workshop at the 78th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Chicago, IL, United States.

¹⁰ Swartz, E. M., Amatucci, F. M., & Marks, J. T. (2019, January 23–27). *South Africa and nascent entrepreneurship: Heeding the call for context* [Conference presentation]. United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship Annual Conference, St. Pete Beach, FL, United States.

¹¹ Swartz, E. M., Marks, J. T., & Scheepers, C. (2020). Venture support organizations – Lighting a path for entrepreneurship in South Africa? *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 10(2), Article 20200060. <https://doi.org/10.1515/erj-2020-0060>

¹² Hidden, K., & Marks, J. T. (2020). Misaligned needs in the pursuit of shared value: A multi-stakeholder study of the shift from corporate social responsibility to corporate social entrepreneurship in an emerging economy. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*, 6(2), 363–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2393957520913766>

¹³ I have published previously in the field of corporate entrepreneurship through a case study focused on Microsoft South Africa and its mechanism of social action and engagement as a form of corporate social entrepreneurship.

Barnard, H., & Marks, J. (2014). *Microsoft South Africa: Corporate entrepreneurship and innovation* (Case No. 9B14M161). Ivey Publishing.

¹⁴ Hidden, K., & Marks, J. T. (2018, December 12–14). *Misaligned needs in the pursuit of shared value: A multi-stakeholder study of the shift from corporate social responsibility to corporate social entrepreneurship in an emerging economy* [Conference presentation]. 17th International Entrepreneurship Forum Conference, Nancy, France.

I continued to work within the domain of corporate entrepreneurship and published a study that tested the resource-based view of the firm as the hypothesised driver of performance differences.¹⁵ This view is a traditionally “big business” theory, which I tested within a dual-structured franchise business in the quick-service restaurant sector. The study highlighted the role of innovation and entrepreneurial mindset as drivers of performance differences between franchised and company-owned stores. Drawing on the thread of entrepreneurial mindset to understand and examine opportunity validation, I published and presented work that investigated the role of temporal mediation in the recognition and evaluation of opportunity.¹⁶

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my research work has focused on case studies that illustrate how businesses – especially start-up businesses – have pivoted, adjusted, and grown through these uncertain times. The first of these cases has been published,¹⁷ with other work under review and final development.¹⁸

I have considered the quality of my publications and while metrics, impact factors, and rankings are an influence on my research decisions, I also hold myself to the standard of considering whether I am joining a conversation that is appropriate to my work, research identity, and research objectives. I evaluate my research against the notion put forward by Kurt Lewin (1943) that “there is nothing as practical as a good theory”.¹⁹ This maxim suggests to me and endorses my belief that, at least within an applied environment like a business school, research should not only serve to advance knowledge, but should have practical and applied value as well. Having spent my formative academic years immersed in this practical milieu through my teaching, I am deeply cognisant of the need for “practical theory” and regard this as an important measure of my research quality. This is further influenced by the domain of entrepreneurship, which while a heavily theorised academic field, is also concerned primarily with the enactment of entrepreneurial activity and this speaks to the need for applicable and practical theory.

3. Current research

My present research continues to focus on the macro domains and questions that have influenced previous work and publications, and which are linked to my overall research identity. I remain interested – now more so than ever, with the impact of COVID-19 becoming more apparent – in how organisations and individuals adapt, change, and advance in the midst of uncertainty and complexity. At present, I have three journal articles under review. The first article focuses on entrepreneurial work roles within a sales-driven environment and examines how income plays a motivating role that influences performance.²⁰ The study draws on and questions current theories of entrepreneurial motivation and entrepreneurial self-efficacy. The second article is a study within a corporate entrepreneurial setting and examines effectuation theory in its relationship with entrepreneurial orientation and regulatory focus.²¹ The work is a continuation of my interest in entrepreneurial cognition and is a functional bridge towards my research trajectory (refer to the section that follows). The third is an article emerging from research conducted with a PhD student and building on my own doctoral work using the phenomenographic research approach, which is currently under review for a special issue of the *African Journal of Management*.²²

¹⁵ Marks, J., & Golevey, E. (2020). Entrepreneurial resources as a driver of performance differences in a quick service restaurant franchise system. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure*, 9(5), 1111–1130. <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-72>

¹⁶ Marks, J., & Batev, T. (2021). Temporal mediation of uncertainty within entrepreneurial opportunity evaluation. *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship*, 26(2), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1084946721500072>

Batev, T., & Marks, J. (2019, August 9–13). *Temporal mediation of uncertainty within entrepreneurial opportunity evaluation* [Conference presentation]. 79th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Boston, MA, United States.

¹⁷ Marks, J. (2020). Granadilla swimwear: Finding opportunity in times of crisis. *Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EEMCS-05-2020-0164>

¹⁸ Marks, J. T. (2021). Harvest Café: Growth & scale through uncertain times. Manuscript submitted for publication.

¹⁹ Lewin, K. (1943). Psychology and the process of group living. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 17(1), 113–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1943.9712269>

²⁰ Marks, J. T., & Fuller, B. (2021). Motivation as a moderator of high performance in entrepreneurial work roles. Manuscript submitted for publication.

²¹ Le Roux, E., & Marks, J. T. (2021). Clarifying effectuation and causation principles: The role of regulatory focus and individual entrepreneurial orientation. Manuscript submitted for publication.

²² Bucci, A., & Marks, J. T. (2021). Social entrepreneurs' experience of learning in South African incubators. Manuscript submitted for publication.

I have completed a book chapter contribution related to faith, religion, and entrepreneurship that is due for publication in 2021.²³ A chapter contribution has also been made to a research handbook of entrepreneurial finance, which will be published in early 2022.²⁴

I have been invited to edit a special issue of the *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*. This special issue focuses on African entrepreneurial ecosystems and will be published in 2022.

I am currently engaged in writing a monograph tentatively titled *The entrepreneurial kaleidoscope: Africa's entrepreneurial future*. A formal book proposal has been prepared for Springer, which has expressed interest in the publication as part of their *Frontiers of African business* book series.

4. Research trajectory

The domain of the entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial cognition is deeply interesting to me. The role of the entrepreneur as the principal agent in entrepreneurial activity is, to my mind, an important frontier of entrepreneurship research. The growth in interest in neuroscience and neuropsychology and how they relate to entrepreneurship, especially high-growth entrepreneurship, will be an area of work that will absorb my focus. This builds on more recent work I have completed and will help me answer the question: "What explains the nature of and call to entrepreneurial action?" I see my future work being more focused on the individual than on the firm as the unit of analysis. As advances are made with respect to our understanding of the brain and entrepreneurial mindsets, I believe we will gain much deeper insights into what predicts, motivates, and sustains successful high-growth entrepreneurship.

I see my work continuing within the domain mentioned above, seeking to understand entrepreneurship at scale and within large-scale national and international systems. These two research work streams – the micro level and the macro level – are indeed apposite points on the entrepreneurial spectrum. However, I believe they are the necessary point and counterpoint to understanding the true nature of entrepreneurial action.

5. In closing

I see my academic journey this far as having three distinct phases. The first was the pursuit of legitimacy through the completion of my PhD. The second was a focus on teaching, learning, and the development and perfection of my craft as an educator. The third centres on finding my intellectual voice as a researcher and academic. I find myself at the start of this third phase. I now believe that I have something to "profess" and intend to continue my pursuit of this, not for the sake of publication alone, but as a contribution to knowledge, meaning, practice, and understanding. Through this phase of my professional work, I intend to truly give life to Popper's notion of the scientist as the "critical spirit" in society.

²³ Marks, J. T., & Mudely, S. (in press). The role of religion in the formation of trust-based relationships amongst South African entrepreneurs. In K. Pavlovich (Ed.), *Spirituality, entrepreneurship & social change*.

²⁴ Marks, J. T., & Bucci, A. (in press). Funding challenges in emerging market business groups. In D. Lingelbach (Ed.), *Entrepreneurial finance research handbook*.