

THEMED ESSAYS

Anthropology and Entrepreneurship Research: Introduction to the Themed Essays

Edward Liebow and Patricia Sunderland

Ethnographic research by anthropologists on entrepreneurship gives us a chance to disrupt and enlarge some of our thinking and assumptions about entrepreneurial endeavors aiming to tackle pressing environmental, economic, and social problems. In 2019, the *Journal of Business Anthropology* published a themed set of articles on entrepreneurship that had originally been papers presented at a conference sponsored by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and Princeton University's Keller Center. This 2019 collection covered a range of individual case studies from locales in North and South America to West Africa and South Asia, framed by an introduction and literature review (see *Journal of Business Anthropology* 8(2)).

The essays presented here in this special section were originally prepared for the American Anthropological Association's third annual symposium on anthropology and entrepreneurship, also sponsored by the Kauffman Foundation. The Foundation is interested in recognizing innovative research on entrepreneurship, and the essays presented here build on the earlier *JBA* themed issue by focusing on: (1) entrepreneurial

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behavior and the social, cultural, and economic institutions that facilitate the emergence and ongoing support of such behavior; (2) innovative approaches to entrepreneurship training and development; (3) partnerships and financial instruments that support new enterprises; and (4) innovative approaches to enterprises that explicitly aim to serve public interests and/or urgent social needs.

The essays were selected because they involve systematic observations and engagement rather than solely presenting theoretical or conceptual models. They are drawn from mixed methods ethnographic research and help us to consider entrepreneurship in a more encompassing frame, moving beyond the prevailing stereotype of the entrepreneur as a risk-taking white male with disruptive goals and motivated largely by money.

The essay by Shuang L. Frost, Yuson Jung, Marlo Rencher, and Dawn Batts focuses on an innovative approach to entrepreneurial training and development. They examine the experiences of Black female tech entrepreneurs who took part in a Detroit-based STEM Entrepreneurial Excellence Program (STEEP). As the authors point out: “Even the pursuit of wealth, which is assumed and comes very naturally to most entrepreneurs, is something that many Black women need to grapple with” (2023: 115). Part of that grappling entails examination of the normative image of white male tech founders as well as realities of racial capitalism and its historical and contemporary ramifications. The authors are interested in whether STEEP can broaden the goals of a training program: can entrepreneurship be emancipating – changing the racialized system that historically and systematically marginalized Black women – while also learning and mastering the rules of the system? For instance, one of the questions asked by a session facilitator as part of the STEEP training was: “How do you think the historical experience of Black people being traded and capitalized has an impact on our collective sense of worth with lack and abundance?” (2023: 123-124). Ultimately, the training goal was to help participants to thrive as entrepreneurs without losing sight of what it means to be a Black female entrepreneur while also redefining what a tech entrepreneur can be. Overall, the authors make clear that entrepreneurship can mean emancipation.

Eisha Choudhary’s essay focuses on Muslim women entrepreneurs in the Delhi metropolitan area to reflect on how their enterprises, adhering to religious principles, explicitly aim to serve public interests and urgent social needs. In her essay, Choudhary stresses the way that the women’s entrepreneurship is shaped at the intersection of faith and economic motivations. Their religious faith serves as a guidepost in terms of the kinds of business endeavors they engage in as well as their ways of conducting business. Thus, their choice of endeavors steers clear of prohibitions against alcohol and fraudulent, usurious, or exploitative transactions. The women who took part in Choudhary’s

research undertook a range of enterprises such as modest clothing stores, cafés, educational start-ups, boutiques, beauty salons, and online media portals. As Choudhary also notes, they also took measures to assure that they were actively engaged in philanthropic initiatives, avoided selling defective items, paid their employees on time and took care of them, helping when needed. Success is seen in terms of life as lived now as well as in the afterlife. In essence, Choudhary's work is a strong statement that adherence to Islamic principles goes hand-in-hand with the women's sense of self and identity as entrepreneurs.

In the essay by Yesenia Ruiz, the lens is focused on entrepreneurial men, but it is nonetheless a disruptive lens in terms of usual assumptions, as her focus is on elite Mexican migrants living in the greater New York metropolitan area and on the institutions that help sustain this elite status while supporting immigrant community development. She provides an enlightening anthropological excursion into the entrepreneurial trajectories of men such as Félix Sánchez, also known as the first "Tortilla King." Sánchez did not enter the United States as an elite entrepreneur; he arrived in the 1970s with very little money and without legal documentation. Most of the men in Ruiz's study entered the US in the 1980s and first worked as laborers, only later becoming entrepreneurs, and doing so based on consumption preferences as well as the labor of other Mexican migrants. Ruiz makes a good case that considerable money has been made based on exploitative labor practices typical of capitalism, even if the typical framing by the entrepreneurs was that "creating jobs for their fellow *paisanos* was a way of giving back to the Mexican community" (2023: 178). Also intriguing in these entrepreneurial stories are the ways that economic success is a means for garnering transnational status and political influence, thereby making their US-based businesses also a means of exercising power and influence not only in the US, but also in Mexico.

Daniel J. Smith's essay illuminates the paradoxical role of the state in facilitating entrepreneurship, taking us to Nigeria, with an important corrective and reminder right at the start of his essay: "for many people around the world, entrepreneurship is borne of necessity" (2023: 184). His essay examines two of the main businesses that have developed to supply water in Umuahia: 1) constructed boreholes from which vendors sell to neighborhood customers; and 2) packaging, sealing, and selling of half-liter plastic "pure water" sachets. Smith brings to light the truly fascinating, networked infrastructure of these businesses that have developed in light of the failure of the state to provide adequate water infrastructure. Importantly, however, he also makes the case that, to provide water, these businesses "must navigate a maze of official and unofficial government requirements" (2023: 185). Thus, while it might superficially appear that the Nigerian state is extremely weak if it cannot even supply an adequate water supply, in reality the state is a strong one

in the sense that it manages to work to the advantage of those who control it – maintaining regulations over water and, ultimately, being enmeshed in the private water infrastructure enterprises; for instance, by issuing licenses and collecting taxes. Smith also makes the point that these businesses run on thin profit margins, such that paying attention to water quality and maintaining good customer relationships is key to maintaining their own business and profits – but, ultimately, the profits are so meager that, rather than creating economic growth, these businesses in reality also contribute to “the privatization and perpetuation of poverty” (2023: 194).

Rounding out these essays and the vantage point on entrepreneurship are the essays from Elena Sischarenco and Matthew J. Hill. Hill’s essay takes us into the innovations made by a California credit union. Drawing on Joseph A. Schumpeter’s classic work on entrepreneurship, Hill makes a good case for the power of collective as well as individual entrepreneurial activity in the form of leadership. Despite considerable regulatory pressures combined with competition from large banks and fintech developments, Hill shows how a credit union was able not only to survive, but also to thrive. Based on future thinking efforts of its CEO, the credit union was able to establish a fully remote workforce and meet the needs of a geographically dispersed membership through its creative and progressive use of AI. Moving from chatbots to conversation bots to resolve bots, credit union staff were not downsized, but rather enabled to gain further education and transform into financial planners who could then assist members in more complex financial matters such as managing investments and estate management. While Hill shows that the CEO’s efforts were crucial to the successful outcome, he also notes the ways in which the CEO relied on the insights and cooperative partnership with other organizations in those efforts.

In the final essay, Sischarenco looks at entrepreneurial businesses from the lens of organization and leads us to the intriguing realization that lack of organization can be a benefit. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among mid-sized manufacturing companies in northern Italy, Sischarenco’s case demonstrates how flexibility and handling problems with “goodwill and improvisation” were the keys to a company’s resilience and success. Overly organized processes tended to slow things down in a world where speed and customization are what matter. Eschewing global outsourcing in favor of in-house vertical production as well as dedicated and loyal managers and employees who tended to see the business success as their own were also crucial. Yet, ultimately Sischarenco presents a compelling case that the vertical production and employee dedication were part and parcel of an organizational anti-structure that foregrounded preparation in the face of the unexpected because, in the words of the CEO, “Reality exceeds imagination” (2023: 215).

From these symposium essays and the scholarship on which they draw, we are convinced that the story of entrepreneurship is more than “the hero’s journey” of a risk-taking individual seeking financial prosperity by bucking prevailing patterns and institutions. Instead, the essays give us the sense that potential entrepreneurs can be found practically anywhere, and their individual success is socially situated. Training, institutions, partnerships, state climate, and financial instruments are all necessary to facilitate the emergence and support of entrepreneurial behavior. The entrepreneur as “lone ranger” is a tall tale that does not hold up to close inspection.

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