



## How can we know the dancer from the dance?

*Reply to “Entrepreneurship as the structuration of individual and opportunity: A response using a critical realist perspective”. (Mole and Mole, 2008)*

O body swayed to music,  
O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer  
from the dance?

W.B. Yeats<sup>1</sup>

How can we know the dancer from the dance? In watching a dance we can locate the dancer and his/her moves. Yet, can we separate the dance from the dancer?<sup>2</sup> Similarly, how we can separate the entrepreneur from the opportunity or the opportunity from the entrepreneur? This is the central issue of Sarason et al. (2006) as well as Mole and Mole (2008-this issue). Certainly, there are scripts in dance, as there are in economic structure, from which a dance may be constructed, or at least, construed. Yet, in the end, the dance is not just the script. Observing the dance, its conditions, and the dancer, it is not difficult to say there is more than the script, for the script does not in any estimation reflect the movement in the dance. Likewise, the dancer is reliant upon the dance to create the movement that defines him/her as a dancer. The two, it seems, exist together, and define one another. So it is that we view the nexus of entrepreneur and opportunity, that is the entrepreneur and the opportunity exist together and define one another.

In Sarason et al. (2006), we propose that Giddens' structuration view is a useful lens through which to view this nexus because of the insights it provides into the recursive nature of agent–structure interaction. In the earlier manuscript we 1) propose the entrepreneur and opportunity nexus as a *duality* in which each cannot be understood separate and distinct from the other, 2) argue that entrepreneurs do not merely fill market gaps, but purposefully co-evolve with social structures to create opportunities and enact ventures, and 3) propose that certain structures will be more salient at different phases in the entrepreneurial processes of discovery, evaluation, and exploitation. Our exploration also surfaced ontological and epistemological issues that represent departures from much of the more positivist and post-positivist work in the field. As such, we believe we contribute to a growing body of research that proposes a more subjectivist and agentic, as opposed to objectivist and deterministic, approach to the study of entrepreneurship (e.g. Sarasvathy, 2001; Chiles et al., 2007; Gartner, 1985; Sarasvathy et al., 2003; Buchanan and Vanberg, 1991).

In their comment on our article, Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) propose Archer's critical realism as an alternative view of agent–structure interaction and, therefore, as an alternative lens from which to view the entrepreneurial process. Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) highlight the differences between critical realism and structuration theory as it applies to entrepreneurship and argue for critical realism as a superior lens to that of structuration theory. In short, Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) claim that not only can one separate the dancer (entrepreneur) from the dance (opportunity) but that it is also more useful to do so.

We welcome the opportunity to extend the conversation on the role of structure and agency in entrepreneurship research, and believe it is important to recognize three issues in this debate. First, the debate between us and Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) is

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Professor Sue Ravenscroft for the suggestion to use this poem to illustrate our points and to Professor's Dawn Detienne and Michael Gross for their comments on an earlier version of the article.

<sup>2</sup> See Gill (1975), for discussion of Yeats and his poem.

reflective of more fundamental debates reflective of more fundamental debates about structuration theory and critical realism within the field of sociology. Second, the broader debate is rooted in the ontological and epistemological assumptions of each perspective. In other words, critical realism and structuration theory begin with alternative ontological and epistemological foundations, and debate about which one might be superior fundamentally reduces to a debate about which ontological and epistemological assumptions are correct. Fortunately, these issues have been addressed extensively, both at the most fundamental philosophical level, and at the level of comparisons across the two views (Archer 2000, 2003, 1996; Clark, 1990; Cohen, 1989; Turner, 1991). Third, and contrary to Mole and Mole (2008–this issue), we suggest that the best approach is one of ontological and epistemological pluralism, wherein it is not a question of which ontology might best “fit” the field, but of what we might learn from each. We hold that greater insight is gained from considering numerous perspectives, than from a reductionist “one right way” position, especially in understanding complex social phenomenon, such as entrepreneurial activity. To do otherwise risks the sacrifice of valuable knowledge and insight.

Our purpose in this reply is to clarify our conceptualization of the entrepreneurial process and the theoretical context within which it might be understood. We rely heavily on the work of Archer (1990), Giddens (1990), Outhwaite (1990), Pozzebon (2004) and Whittington (1988,1992) who have considerable work that compares structuration theory to critical realism. We begin with a comparative discussion of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the two views of the entrepreneurial process. Next, we consider the relative advantages of understanding the relationship between entrepreneur and entrepreneurial opportunities as a *duality* versus a *dualism*. We suggest that each perspective is looking at the nexus of entrepreneur and opportunity through different lens. Finally, we describe how each perspective differs in the conceptualization of *structure* and *agency*. We suggest that both structuration theory and critical realism add appropriate insight into understanding entrepreneurship as the *nexus* of entrepreneur and opportunities even though, and because, each is taking a different view of the *nexus*. Hopefully, this exchange of comments facilitates a renewed recognition that there is no one best or right answer in entrepreneurial research.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Ontological assumptions of structuration theory and critical realism

Clarification of the underlying ontological assumptions of a theory is critical in fields such as management and entrepreneurship. A fine grained discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper and hence we are using a broad categorization of ontologies and epistemologies. Ontological assumptions can be conceptualized on a continuum that ranges from *objective* to *subjective* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Johnson and Duberley, 2000).<sup>4</sup> A more *objective* ontology assumes that a “real” world is out there and that it is possible to know “how things really work”. *Objective* ontological assumptions are the basis for the positivist and post/positivist perspectives that have dominated the field of entrepreneurship (Leibenstein, 1979; Kirzner, 1973; Schumpeter, 1934; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). A more *subjective* ontology assumes that “reality” is an output of human cognitive processes. Work drawing on more subjective ontologies have been less prevalent, but has nevertheless been an area of some recent interest (Chiles et. al., 2007; Buchanan and Vanberg, 1991; Gartner, 1985; Sarasvathy, 2001; Sarasvathy et. al., 2003).

The intent of both Giddens (1979, 1984, 1991), who initially developed structuration theory, and Bhaskar (1978, 1986, 1989), who developed critical realism, was to attempt to bridge objective and subjective ontologies, albeit through different paths. Their theses were that the debate between objective and subjective ontologies was artificial and that it was possible to develop a theory that incorporates both. Each theoretician was explicit in this goal, as the dichotomy has been a longstanding debate among social scientists. The work of Pozzebon (2004) is helpful in understanding the differences between structuration theory and critical realism. We are in agreement with her view of these two theories as reflected in this statement:

Although Bhaskar and Giddens are comparable regarding their anti-dichotomist views of the structure–action debate, they differ ontologically in several aspects. For instance, Bhaskar's realist ontology produces a categorical distinction between human action and social structure, seeing them as fundamentally different (Reed, 1997). Such an interpretation departs from the central notion of the duality of structure as proposed by Giddens, where structure and human action are not seen as categorically distinct but as instantiations of each other. In addition, postulating structures as enduring generative components that pre-exist the social activities through which they are reproduced and transformed, Bhaskar ascribed primacy to structure rather than structuration and once again departs from Giddens (Cohen, 1989). From my point of view Bhaskar and Giddens try to solve the agency/structure dichotomy through different ontological routes. Researchers espousing a realistic ontology will likely tend toward Bhaskar's account and those ascribing to a nominalist or constructivist ontology should find structuration theory more appealing. The choice between critical realism and structuration theory is one of ontological order. Both contribute the ‘problem of human agency’ and to a more ‘adequate theory of strategic choice’, but they just do it differently. (Pozzebon, 2004: pg. 251).

Pozzebon's (2004) referral to “realistic ontology” reflects more *objective* ontology, which is in more alignment with the critical realists. Her reference to nominalist or constructivist ontologies reflects more *subjective* ontology, which is in more alignment with the structurationists.

<sup>3</sup> In particular we are addressing the authors' comment (Mole and Mole, 2008–this issue) “a portrayal of the critical realist perspective is more appropriate than the structuration perspective.” (page 5).

<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that we are simplifying complex and nuanced categorizations of ontologies and epistemologies. For more in depth discussion of these issues see for example: Burrell and Morgan (1979), Deetz (1995) Guba and Lincoln (1994), Johnson and Duberley (2000), and Reed (1997).

With this fundamental distinction in mind, we would like to address several concerns that were presented regarding our paper. In critiquing our application of structuration theory to entrepreneurship, Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) suggest that structure is held in the memory of agent's minds and that the various strata of social reality are flattened to interpret social practices. Giddens does discuss structures as being in the memory traces of the agents. However, Giddens goes on to develop a hierarchy of structural properties that vary in terms of the degree of concreteness. This could include the institutionalization that a process/rule/etc. has acquired within the society. Within the context of structuration theory, this does not flatten the strata of social reality. As we stated "We propose structuration theory (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1991) as a useful framework for better understanding the nexus of entrepreneur and opportunity as it theorizes the *interdependence* of context (structure) and actor (agent) in the moment and across time and space." (pg. 289, italics included for emphasis). Our purpose was to better understand the dualistic relationship of entrepreneur and entrepreneurial opportunities, not to suggest that opportunities are solely in the mind of the entrepreneur.

Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) also make the following statement about our article: "It is harder to maintain that opportunities are not 'out-there' in the case of imitative ventures. In addition, Sarason et al. (2006) make no reference to the particular sources of opportunities such as changes in technology, politics, demographics, and culture." (pg. 10). Again, we are not assuming there is no 'out-there'. In entrepreneurship there has been a focus on one agent (the entrepreneur). A structuration view is that social systems are comprised of multiple agents that are being enabled and constrained by social structures. While we did not discuss particular sources of opportunities, as we were focusing on the nature of the relationship between entrepreneur and opportunities, we did discuss how different types of structures are salient with different social systems.

## 2. Epistemological assumptions of structuration theory and critical realism

The epistemological question in entrepreneurship is; "What is the nature of the relationship between the observer of entrepreneurial activities and the activities". Similar to ontological perspectives, epistemological assumptions can be categorized along an objective/subjective continuum (see Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Because the focus is on the observer and the observed, methodology is closely tied to epistemology. Quantitative methodologies that draw upon survey research and large data sets usually assume what are generally characterized as more objective epistemologies. Qualitative methodologies include narratives, case studies and ethnographies, and assume more subjective epistemologies. Examples of both types of methodologies have been used in entrepreneurial research and have yielded significant insights to the field.

In reviewing the comment to our article, we take objection to Mole and Mole (2008-this issue) "The methodological implications of Sarason et al. (2006) are profound in that each opportunity is unique to the entrepreneur, which renders large-scale survey data as problematic. They argue for longitudinal studies using qualitative research methods that seek to understand rather than predict. These would be interviews with individuals, on a recursive basis comparing snapshots of time, without the ability to view interaction with the environment. From their perspective there is an inability to be able to explain the influence and interaction of the individual, rather they seek to interpret the entrepreneurial technique." (pg 10). We argued that more subjective qualitative methodologies should be valued as they allow a focus on evolutionary dynamics and process variables to investigate a structuration view of entrepreneurship; this is not to say that more traditional quantitative investigations are inappropriate. We agree with Giddens statement that, "... qualitative and quantitative methods should be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic aspects of social research. Each is necessary to the other if the substantive nature of the duality of structure is to be 'charted' in terms of the forms of institutional articulation whereby contexts of interaction are co-ordinated within more embracing social systems." (Giddens, 1984, pg. 334). Giddens describes various quantitative and qualitative studies from a structuration perspective (1984: pg. 304). Moreover, studies using a structuration foundation are represented among a plethora of different methodologies (Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005).

## 3. The nexus of entrepreneur and opportunity portrayed as a duality versus a dualism

Consistent with differences in the ontological assumptions of structuration theory and critical realism, each perspective reflects differences in the portrayal of the relationship between the agent and structure. Structuration theorists understand the relationship of agent and structure as a *duality*. In contrast, critical realists see the relationship as a *dualism*. Giddens' and our definition of the *duality* of structure is: "Structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organized: The structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction." (1984, pg. 374). This conceptualization of structure has been argued to represent structuration theory's major contribution to social science, as it addresses the agent/structure dichotomy that had been problematic for social theorists (Turner, 1991; Outhwaite, 1990). In addressing critics of his conceptualization of structuration theory, Giddens states, "One of the main contributions of structuration theory is to provide a more subtle and satisfactory analysis of social constraint than existed hitherto. Structure and action cannot form a dualism, save from the point of view of situated actors, because each is constituted by and in a single 'realm' – human activity." (Giddens, 1990).

We draw upon Giddens' conceptualization of a *dualistic* relationship between agents and structure when we stated: "Structuration theory specifies a reciprocal relationship between agency and structure, and as such offers a perspective that specifically articulates the relationship between agent (entrepreneur) and structure (opportunity) as a *duality*. A *duality*, as opposed to a *dualism*, presents two constructs that cannot exist, or be understood separate from each other." (Sarason et al., 2006: pg 289).

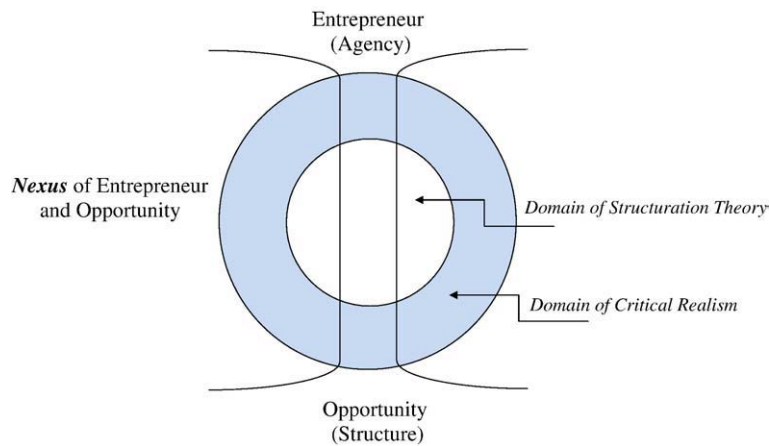


Fig. 1. Domain of Structuration Theory and Critical Realism in the Nexus of Entrepreneur and Opportunity.

The purpose of presenting the entrepreneur and opportunity as a *dualistic* relationship was to offer an alternative understanding and therefore a contribution to entrepreneurial research. The status quo for entrepreneurial research was the presentation of the relationship as a *dualism* that views the entrepreneur as separate and distinct from entrepreneurial opportunities, including Shane and Venkataraman (2000) and the Mole and Mole (2008–this issue). Mole and Mole (2008–this issue) Archer (1995) critiques structuration theory because agents cannot produce structures at will and some structures are beyond the control of agents. Mole and Mole (2008–this issue) argue that the result of this constraint is that structuration cannot examine the nexus of entrepreneurship and opportunity. Hopefully, we have been clear that we are not saying that agents create structures at will but that structures are not created without agents and that they cannot be maintained or changed without agents. This duality attempts to consider how structure affects agency and how agency in turn affects structure. As has been made clear, agents are both enabled and constrained by structures, which cannot be understood separate and distinct from agency. While both structuration theory and critical realism offer insights into the nexus of entrepreneur and entrepreneurial opportunities we submit that each is focusing on different aspects of the nexus. Fig. 1 illustrates a conceptualization of these differences.

Since critical realists view the entrepreneur as separate and distinct from opportunity, they would focus on the aspects of entrepreneurship that are closer to either the entrepreneur or the opportunity. Mole and Mole (2008–this issue) they would hold one constant so they can understand the other. Mole and Mole (2008–this issue) reflect an outmoded conceptualization of social science (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Given the complexity of the activity, we question whether in reality it is reasonable to expect that one could actually ‘hold one constant’ and gain meaningful insights about the other. Though, of course, this debate is beyond the scope of this discussion. In contrast, because a structuration view assumes that the entrepreneur and opportunities cannot be understood as separate and distinct from each other, the focus would be closer to the nexus where there is less distinction between entrepreneur and opportunity (see Fig. 1). We continue to hold that this focus allows for a more subtle and nuanced understanding of the entrepreneur and opportunities. This process is more difficult to capture, but we would advocate that it captures a more complex portrayal of the entrepreneurial process, as we continue to struggle with understanding the dancer apart from the dance.

#### 4. Portrayal of structure: structuration theory and critical realism

We would like to emphasize that we do not agree with Mole and Mole (2008–this issue) interpretation of our presentation of structure, nor their depiction of Giddens' concept of structure. As noted above, the relative importance of *structure* and *agency* differs between structuration theory and critical realism.<sup>5</sup> As we outlined in the reference to Pozzebon's (2004) work, relative to structuration theory, critical realism focuses primarily on *structural* influences and secondarily on *agency*. In contrast, structuration theory focuses primarily on agency influences and secondarily on structural influences. We see both perspectives as recognizing the important role of *both* agency and structure in understanding the complex social processes involved in entrepreneurship. The difference is not in definitions of structure and agent, but in the nature of the relationship.

We are not in agreement with the authors of the comment regarding how Giddens presents structure. They state, “For Giddens structure is subjective, it consists of rules and resources and is the medium by which power is activated. Although he believes structures are created by agents these are current agents as opposed to Archer's previous ones.” (pg 4). This reflects a misrepresentation of our portrayal of structure, missing the nuance of Giddens' theorizing about structures and the social context within which agents act. Structure is much more than just rules and resources. Moreover, structures are not simply created by current agents. Giddens differentiates between structures and structural properties and social institutions. The differentiations

<sup>5</sup> Similar to Pozzebon (2004) and Whittington (1988).

allow for more subtle distinctions and understandings of structure. The more “stable” structures are obviously the result of past actions of agents, but these past actions mean nothing unless they are instantiated into action by the current agent. The past actions can influence the memory traces of the current agents. This is learning and is very much a part of structuration theory, as we understand it.

There are aspects of [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) presentation of structure from a critical realist perspective that are in accordance with a structuration perspective. For example, we are in agreement with the following statement, “Entrepreneurs view the structural changes, act on them (or not) and then change the existing structure to their advantage; an example of this may be the dot.com boom in the late 1990s, where the influx of so many entrepreneurs legitimated the Internet industry.” (pg 11). In many ways, this statement could have been included in our paper as a description of structure from a structuration view.

## 5. Portrayal of agency: structuration theory and critical realism

In addition to disagreeing with [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) portrayal of our presentation of structure, we disagree with the portrayal of *agency*. We take exception to the author’s comment, “Giddens theory puts a greater responsibility on the agent, since the agent who instantiates structure has to have a deep knowledge of that structure.” While it is acknowledged that agents are knowledgeable, this is not so say that they are consciously constructing structures. Much of the knowledgeability of agents is tacit and not readily available for reflection. For example, as the [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) referenced, multiple entrepreneurs drew upon multiple social structures in helping to create what became known as the dot.com industry.

We are in agreement with aspects of the [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) portrayal of agents. They state, “... actors have life histories that show many changes as they formulate projects (including entrepreneurship) that bring into play the enablement and constraints of their situation. Reflecting upon these experiences, the agent acquires knowledge about their society.” (pg 13). Moreover, we agree with their statement that “... agents are able to view and react to the emergent properties of structures. They are reflexive, as they come up against the constraints and enablement of society in accordance with their ultimate concerns they have the ability to learn. It is this process that results in change or stasis. In essence, entrepreneurship is the study of the interplay between the structures of a society and the agents within it.” (pg 20). These statements are consistent with our argument, it is therefore hard to understand how [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) conclude that structuration is “ill suited” for application to entrepreneurship (pg 7).

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of our response has been to contribute to the field by clarifying structuration theory and critical realism and their ontological and epistemological foundations as applied to entrepreneurship. We acknowledge [Mole and Mole \(2008-this issue\)](#) for struggling to bring two abstract and rather dense theoretical and ontological perspectives to entrepreneurship scholarship: structuration theory and critical realism. Our intent has been to engage in a dialogue that helps bring a better appreciation of each perspective, their subtleties, their limitations, and therefore their implications. We were not, and are not, arguing that structuration theory is the “best” lens through which to understand the entrepreneurial process, nor are we convinced that critical realism is the best lens.

However, we welcome the dialog with respect to the ontological assumptions in entrepreneurial research and the opportunity to offer alternative perspectives to the more traditional perspectives. Indeed, both structuration and critical realism views are largely consistent with the more subjectivist and/or agentic approaches to entrepreneurship including effectuation ([Sarasvathy, 2001](#)), creative process ([Buchanan and Vanberg, 1991](#); [Sarasvathy et al., 2003](#); [Chiles et al., 2007](#)), and applications of institutional economics within the market failure framework ([Dean and McMullen, 2007](#)). They are also consistent with a growing body of work in the area of institutional entrepreneurship, wherein the role of institutional agency in the entrepreneurial process is increasingly recognized ([Beckert, 1999](#), [Garud et al., 2007](#)), and both structuration theory and critical realism have been utilized ([Garud et al., 2002](#); [Mutch, 2007](#)).

We have presented the perspective that structuration theory and critical realism are focusing on a different “slice” of the nexus of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial opportunities (see [Fig. 1](#)). This difference is fundamentally due to understanding this relationship as a *duality* (from a structuration perspective) or as a *dualism* (from the critical realism perspective). There are some that will continue to see the entrepreneur (dancer) separate from entrepreneurial opportunities (the dance) and others Sarason et al. and Yates cannot separate them. Regardless, may we all continue to value, appreciate and understand the dancer and the dance.

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Original citation: Mole, Kevin and Mole, Miranda. (2010) Entrepreneurship as the structuration of individual and opportunity: a response using a critical realist perspective: comment on Sarason, Dean and Dillard. *Journal of Business Venturing*, Volume 25 (Number 2). pp. 230-237. ISSN 0883-9026. Intrapreneur uses his skills, talent and share his idea associated with those activities. They are usually an employees within a company who are assigned a special idea or project. It is defined as the process that activated the entrepreneurs to exert a high level of effort for the achievement of his/her goal. Or In other words it can be defined as drive or forces within an entrepreneur that effect his/her direction, intensity and persistence of voluntary behaviour. Or Entrepreneurial motivation is the drive of an entrepreneur to maintain an entrepreneurial spirit in all their actions. Competency is a set of defined behaviours that provide a structured guide enabling the identification, evaluation and development of the behaviours in an individual. "Respect for work". Realists view human beings as inherently egoistic and self-interested to the extent that self-interest overcomes moral principles. At the debate in Sparta, described in Book I of Thucydides' History, the Athenians affirm the priority of self-interest over morality. They say that considerations of right and wrong have "never turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandizement offered by superior strength" (chap. 1 par. 76). (2) Realists, and especially today's neorealists, consider the absence of government, literally anarchy, to be the primary determinant of international political outcomes. The lack of a common rule-making and enforcing authority means, they argue, that the international arena is essentially a self-help system. Entrepreneurship is the oldest form of business organization in the world. In fact, the concept of entrepreneurship is believed to be born in the 1700's! Over the time it has evolved to keep up with the changes of our world. Let us learn about the Four Key Elements of Entrepreneurship. They use innovation to exploit opportunities available in the market and overcome any threats. So this innovation can be a new product, service, technology, production technique, marketing strategy, etc. Or innovation can involve doing something better and more economically. It is the energy that drives the business forward by using the foresight of the entrepreneur. It is what gives the business an outline for the future " the tasks to complete, the risks to take, the culture to establish, etc.