

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

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PERSPECTIVE ON ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTION.**

**Published in W Zerbe, et al (2010) (eds) *RESEARCH ON EMOTIONS IN
ORGANIZATIONS* 6 Emerald, London. pp 63-83**

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ISSN: 1746-9791/doi:10.1108/S1746-9791(2010)0000006007

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PUTTING EMOTION AT THE HEART OF AGENCY: A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTION.

Abstract

In both sociology and economics, conceptions of agency have given little systematic attention to the role of emotion, favouring an implicit or explicit recourse to rational choice as the main driver of motivated action. In the case of sociologically informed theories (the focus of this paper) this hinders the requirement to reconcile the relational basis of social life with agency's demand for individuality. This, in turn, prevents a clear break from the limitations of methodological individualism. By placing emotion at the heart of agency we propose a theory that can recognise individuality without recourse to individualism. The paper makes a case for a relational conception of agency that focuses on the role of emotions, corporeality and social interactions. We illustrate this approach through a re-analysis of structural hole theory, an attempt to explain (unsatisfactorily in our view) entrepreneurial behaviour by recourse to social network theory. We show how an emotionally informed concept of agency can resolve the unhelpful tension between the structural qualities of network relationships and the capacity for individual action.

Introduction

In much everyday and social scientific discourse, agency stands for a bundle of attributes associated with notions of individual voluntarism and the ability to 'make a difference': 'self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 962)¹. These notions are also deeply embedded in many of our normative conceptions of entrepreneurship: the 'generalised entrepreneur' frequently appears as an independent and heroic individual, 'a symbol of self-determination . . . of causal powers at the behest of uncaused causes that begin and end in ourselves' (Moldoveanu and Nohria, 2002: 81).

But few entrepreneurship researchers use the agency construct as a theoretical term. For disciplines regarding entrepreneurship through the lens of methodological individualism, there are alternative and more established ways to portray individual action, such as rational choice or personality structure. For relational approaches, such as social network theory, the characteristics of *specific* individuals are usually assumed to be inconsequential in comparison to structural position. The most concerted attempts to incorporate notions of agency have been made by writers adopting forms of structuration theory. But even here the concept has struggled to add anything that is singularly distinctive in terms of explanatory power. Sarason et al's (2006) well developed structuration theory of entrepreneurship, for instance, conceives agency as an essential individual power that, through reflection and interpretation, enables actors to 'make a difference'. Such a conception gives a welcome emphasis to the ways in which entrepreneurs are implicated in the dynamic and ongoing creation of opportunities: 'knowledgeable entrepreneurs are empowered to act in a manner that influences structures (opportunities), and to reflexively monitor the impact of their actions leading to actions that reinforce, modify, or create new opportunities' (2006: 292). But it does little to explain why some individuals appear

¹ On the debate over the nature of agency in sociological theory see, e.g., Barnes (2000), Giddens (1979; 1991), Bourdeiu (1990), Joas (1996), Bhaskar (1979).

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

to have a greater capacity for agency than others and why, in turn, some of the former turn this agency towards entrepreneurial, rather than other forms of action. In this it has followed a tradition in social science that, as Emirbayer and Mische have pointed out, places too great an emphasis on individual 'goal seeking and purposivity . . . , deliberation and judgment' (1998: 963).

We will suggest that by developing Emirbayer and Mische's more complex internally differentiated conception of agency to give greater salience to emotional dynamics, and combining this with insights from Randall Collins's interaction ritual chain theory, we can address not only the ways in which agency is manifested in entrepreneurial activity but also how and why it comes to take the form it does.

A relational conception of agency.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) aim to develop an internally differentiated notion of agency, the interplay between the dimensions of which is inherently connected to the temporal dynamics of social situations and experiences. Agency becomes 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past . . . but also oriented toward the future . . . and toward the present' (ibid). We will elaborate and develop these temporal dimensions of agency below, indicating provisionally their potential usefulness for an understanding of entrepreneurial action.

Drawing upon Mead's notion of 'emergent events' (wherein social action is constructed within ongoing and simultaneous (re)orientations towards past, present and future, rather than corresponding to a sequence of discrete stages), Emirbayer and Mische's concept of agency specifies three temporal orientations that exist as interpenetrating layers, their respective dominance and mutual harmony shifting in response to social situations.

'*Iteration*' is the dimension that focuses predominantly on the past and involves the 'selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions and institutions over time' (1998: 971). This is the basis for those conceptions of agency that have emphasised its conservative effects, as in the notions of 'routine' (Giddens) and 'habitus' (Bourdieu). However, as we have shown elsewhere, and as has been discussed widely in the literature on emotions (e.g., Author, 2005b; 2007; Scheff, 1990; Barbalet, 2002; Jacoby, 1996; Tangney and Dearing, 2002), retrospection can also have a disruptive effect, supporting an individual's predilection for resistance, challenge and innovation. For some individuals disruption can be its own form of routine and a vital component of entrepreneurial action (Scheff, 1990; 1997; Kets de Vries, 1996). To comprehend entrepreneurial agency, therefore, this disruptive aspect of iteration (a potential stimulus for 'creative destruction'; Schumpeter, 1950) needs to be acknowledged.

Emirbayer and Mische's second dimension of agency is the '*projective*' or future-oriented component. This encompasses 'the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (1998: 971). This dimension is clearly relevant to entrepreneurialism

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

although within the field it has been conceived predominantly through the lenses of individual rational planning, purposive/instrumental goal-setting and cognitive processes (see Shane, 2003 for an extensive assessment of such approaches). The relational conception of projectivity, however, expands upon these essentially cognitive frames to incorporate discursive (i.e., cultural) and emotional dimensions of projectivity through the notions of ‘narrative construction’ and ‘symbolic recomposition’. Initial work in the areas of entrepreneurial discourse has shown this to be a promising area for further development (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005; Dodd, 2002; Rigg, 2005)

Agency’s third and present-focused dimension is ‘*practical evaluation*’. This is seen as a form of ‘contextualisation’ of social experiences, established through ‘communicative transactional’ processes involving ‘deliberation with others (or sometimes, self-reflexively with themselves) about the pragmatic and normative exigencies of lived situations [whereby] actors gain in the capacity to make *considered decisions* that may challenge received patterns of action’ (1998: 994). Whilst deliberation and communication are clearly involved in our responses to social situations, it seems equally clear that many of these practical evaluative performances also have non-cognitive or para-cognitive dimensions (Argyle, 1991; Urry, 2002), dimensions that hinge upon emotions and corporeality. As Boden and Molotch (1994; also Collins 2004) make clear, ‘deliberations’ with others are not merely forums for the exchange of information; they have an embodied character that both motivates participation and ‘authenticates’ the information that is exchanged. An important part of such bodily proximity is the generation of emotion. Scheff (1990, 1997), for instance, contends that emotions such as pride and shame can be stimulated – almost automatically – by subtle, frequently non-verbal, communications that convey evaluations of deference within social interaction, and initiate courses of (inter)action that are a socially-oriented response to the feelings thus evoked. As Author (2007; 2005b) has argued, these types of interactionally generated emotion are integral to entrepreneurialism and therefore need to be incorporated into a conception of entrepreneurial agency.

In summary, this notion of agency as a chordal triad of differing temporal orientations (supplemented by a recognition of corporeal and emotional processes) has a potential contribution to play in understanding entrepreneurial agency. Firstly, it integrates concerns that, where elsewhere addressed, have been treated as discrete and largely unconnected processes. Thus, although researchers have recognised the significance of biography, discourse, planning, and action for entrepreneurship, these have not been brought together as interrelated components of a unified agentic process. Secondly, it moves the notion of agency away from excessive individualism and towards a more thoroughly socialised and relational conception, thereby creating the potential for fruitful connections with more structurally oriented approaches, such as network theory, allowing us to appreciate the significance of individuality without the theoretical difficulties associated with individualism. However, it is in this area that Emirbayer and Mische’s conception is least developed.

Interaction Ritual and Emotional Energy

Despite its relational focus, Emirbayer and Mische’s theory of agency fails to provide a definitive answer to the question of how agency – or more specifically, variations in agency – relates to the ‘temporal-relational context of action’, that is, structure. This

means that the exact determinants of the interrelationships between the three components of agency remain ambiguous and unclear, as do the effects that are likely to stem from differences in the priority attached to each dimension at any particular time. We believe that by combining these three dimensions of agency with insights from Collins's interaction ritual chain theory (IRCT), we can remove these ambiguities and move towards a theory of entrepreneurial agency that has clearer explanatory and predictive power. To pre-empt the argument to follow, we suggest that these agentive dimensions are best regarded as individual processes for dealing with the emotional energy generated within particular forms of patterned social interaction. By understanding these interactional dynamics we can address the lack of specific attention to embodiment and emotion and specify the nature and orientation of agentive powers under given conditions. First, however, we need to provide an account of the notion of interaction ritual chains.

Although he does not use the term agency, Collins (2004) offers a theory of motivation, driven by 'emotional energy' (EE), that generates the effects usually attributed to agency. Emotional energy is generated within social situations having the status of interaction rituals. Such situations form 'chains' that have both temporal and relational dimensions. The former (operating through memory) constitutes individual biography, the latter connects individuals in network relationships, the stability and intensity of which are shaped by ritual success or failure. Both individual motivation (agency) and the foundations of 'social structure' are ritually generated, the latter via collectively shared symbols and interactional solidarity, the former as emotional energy. As with Emirbayer and Mische, the temporal and relational are key dimensions of action, but whereas these writers focus with greater precision on the nature of agency, IRCT offers a more explicit account of the relationship between action and its social context. As we will show in the following section, integrating these approaches offers considerably more scope for a theory of entrepreneurial action.

Collins (2004) conceives interaction rituals in terms of ingredients and outcomes. The former include group assembly (involving physical co-presence), barriers to outsiders (some sense of exclusive membership), a mutual focus of attention, and a shared mood. Together these ingredients have the potential to generate a sense of 'collective effervescence' (a sense of shared emotional engrossment and excitement) that, if sustained, translates into group solidarity, individual experiences of 'emotional energy', the production of symbols representing the group, and the development of standards of morality appropriate to group members². The underpinning theory regarding the dynamics of situational co-presence, interactional focus and solidarity within ritual is well established and will not be repeated here (see, e.g., Durkheim 1965; Goffman 1967; Argyle, 1991; Katz, 1999; Letiche and Hagemeyer, 2004; Boden and Molotch, 1994; Hatfield *et al*, 1994; Crow, 2002), but that relating to emotional energy and symbolism is distinctive to Collins's work and requires some elaboration.

² *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Collins, 2004) lays out IRCT in great detail, together with underpinning theoretical and empirical evidence for its propositions and case studies of its application in a variety of contexts.

'Emotional energy' is the lynch-pin of IRCT. It refers to a long-term 'emotional tone' ranging from an 'up' tone of excitement and happiness to a 'down' tone of depression and sadness³. The level of emotional energy that an individual receives depends on the success of the ritual as a collective activity and the nature of an individual's participation within it. In broad terms, an occasion that is highly intersubjective, that succeeds in focusing actors' mutual attention, will produce 'high points of collective experience' and the more entrained an individual is within such an activity (i.e., as a central participant rather than a marginal observer), the more individual EE they will feel: 'These are the events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies, and sometimes to obsessive attempts to repeat them . . . if the patterns endure we are apt to call them personalities (2004: 43).

Emotional energy is the crucial motivating outcome of interaction rituals: 'human bodies come out of the [IR] situation charged with emotional outcomes, which in turn set up what will happen in their next situations' (2004: 105). It is by tracing these flows of emotions and emotion-laden cognitions, Collins claims, that we can conceive how social order, produced on the micro-level 'concatenates into macro patterns' (ibid). For now, however, we concentrate our attention on the micro-level situational dynamics that shape this emotional outcome, considering later how these effects impact upon established social relations. At the individual level, claims Collins, 'EE gives energy, not just for physical activity . . . but above all for taking the initiative in social interaction, putting enthusiasm into it, taking the lead in setting the level of emotional entrainment' (2004: 107).

The relative degree of emotional intensity that each IR reaches is implicitly compared with other IRs within those persons' social horizons, drawing individuals to social situations where they feel more emotionally involved, and away from other interactions that have a lower emotional magnetism or an emotional repulsion' (Collins, 2004: xiv).

Such interaction rituals constitute individual biographies and identities by forming 'chains' or networks of social attraction and repulsion, mediated by the emotional energy generated within them. This process is further facilitated by EE's cognitive dimension which operates through memory's ability to attach an emotional charge to ritually generated symbols, the valency of which stimulates a rational evaluation of available interaction opportunities in terms of their EE potential.

³ The notion of emotional energy is contentious and is often criticised for being a hypothetical construct. However, not only does Collins give a detailed account of its empirical basis and associated measurement techniques, but it is also possible to trace its provenance to emotion constructs that have a well established position in empirical research. For example, the existence of such relatively enduring feelings of pleasantness/unpleasantness is well supported in the literature, sometimes labelled mood (e.g., Forgas, 1992; Lazarus, 1991; Forgas and George, 2001; Kelly and Barsade, 2001; Watson and Tellegen, 1985). This is also similar to Lawler's (2001) conception of emotion in his affect theory of social exchange which is an extension of Weiner's (1986) attribution theory: global emotions are outcome-dependent, 'first-level, involuntary responses, felt and perceived by the actors but sufficiently ambiguous to motivate an attribution process' (Lawler, 2001:328). These equate to being 'up' or 'down'. They are 'motivating states in exchange relationships because, once they are part of conscious awareness, actors strive to reproduce positive feelings and avoid negative feelings' (Lawler and Thye, 1999: 235). The connection with solidarity is similar to Lawler's contention that global emotions from social exchanges that involve high interdependence of actors and non-seperability of tasks enhance both self-efficacy and collective efficacy (2001: 341).

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

A successful interaction ritual produces group solidarity that, in turn, encourages members to construct symbols representing the group and its activities, either in the form of sacred objects (emblems, totems) or specialised discourses. Within ITCT, symbolic resources provide a crucial articulating mechanism, operating both within and between rituals – carrying emotions from one situation to another. These symbols, when committed to memory, retain some of the emotional charge generated during the rituals in which they were used, and thereby continue to exert an emotional influence after the ritual itself (*qua* interpersonal encounter) has ended. They are the temporal carriers of emotional energy.

For Collins, IR chains create market-like conditions because of the opportunities they present for the matching of symbols and EE⁴. As symbols acquire an emotional charge through their use in previous IRs they serve as indicators of (potential) membership status in future interactions (highly charged symbols indicating secure membership and vice versa). Actors will initially be attracted to others who value the same type of symbol, or, failing a direct match, who offer scope for symbolic compatibility. Because the emotional charge attached to a given symbol varies between individuals (depending on the success of the generative ritual and place within it), there is also scope for matching levels of EE. The greatest attraction will be to situations where there is both a potential for matching symbols (however tentative or exploratory) and the possibility of complementary EE exchange.

Regarding emotional matching, individuals with high EE tend, according to Collins, not to interact on a sustained basis with other high EE individuals as this would create conflicts over control and initiative. Typically, they will prefer to interact with individuals of moderate EE, sufficient to initiate the focus and mood for an IR, but not to challenge the EE ‘star’. Thus, where previous IR chain experiences ‘pump up’ an individual’s EE, they have the potential, if unrivalled, to act ‘as a unique catalyst, getting the encounter going focused around him or herself, with the result of further reinforcing his/her EE’ (Collins, 2004: 156). Individuals with lower EE levels are likely to be prepared to act as deferential and committed followers, at least initially, in the expectation that their association with a more powerful individual will enhance their access to symbolic capital and a share of the EE generated around them (Summers-Effler, 2002). We will elaborate on the more detailed implications of these dynamics in our consideration of Entrepreneurial agency below.

In summary, we believe that the difficulties with Emirbayer and Misch’s agency-context link can be largely resolved by recourse to IRCT. Together these frameworks offer an explicit temporally differentiated conception of agency that retains coherent links to social situations: both agency and situation are connected through the notion of emotional energy⁵. To demonstrate this potential we will apply this framework to structural hole theory.

⁴ Collins (2004: ch. 4) offers a detailed account of the market for interaction rituals and posits the use of EE as a common denominator of exchange relationships, thereby resolving many of the problems associated with rational choice theory.

⁵ The overlap between these theories is well illustrated in Collins’s notion of the socially constructed personality: ‘When a particular human body walks away from a social encounter, he or she carries a residue of emotions and symbols, and what he or she does in those moments alone comes from their interplay, whether reflecting backward in time, forward to future encounters, or into an inner space of

Entrepreneurial agency and structural holes: an illustrative case.

Structural holes reflect the distinction between redundant and non-redundant ties within a network. The former are characteristic of close/strong-tie networks where individuals share common interests, values and outlooks and interact on a frequent basis. Members of such networks tend to view the world and receive information about it in a similar way to other members; information circulates within the network rather than between it and other, different, networks. Redundancy is produced because extending the network to other similarly minded and positioned people yields no additional information benefit – indeed, it results in a cost, as additional relationships have to be maintained that produce nothing new. Where two or more closed networks exist, there is the potential for ‘bridging’ between them – a structural hole – and this is the role of the entrepreneur, essentially a broker of information between mutually closed networks. An individual who assumes this brokering role reduces redundancy in their network as each bridging tie adds new information, unavailable within a closed network.

Individuals with high numbers of structural holes in their networks are, according to Burt, best placed to engage in information arbitrage and to reap the benefits of this rare and potentially valuable knowledge (social capital). They are entrepreneurs: people who add value ‘by brokering the connection between others’ (2000a: 8). This is the role of the ‘tertius gaudens’ (the ‘third who benefits’): ‘In the swirling mix of preferences characteristic of social networks, where no demands have absolute authority, the tertius negotiates for favourable terms. Structural holes are the setting for tertius strategies, and information is the substance’ (ibid). This role involves both the gather of *information* and the exercise of *control* over how this information is deployed, ‘the form of the projects that bring together people from opposite sides of the hole’ (Burt, 2000a: 7). Within this formulation, however, there is a theoretical tension deriving from the recognition that tertius role’s successful performance demands exceptional individual motivation: ‘such [brokering] behaviour is not to everyone’s taste. A player can respond in ways ranging from fully developing the opportunity to ignoring it’ (Burt, 2000b: 310). The tension arises from the difficulty of reducing a commitment to relational analysis to the recognition of individual causality and, whilst Burt et al (1998) explore personality as a possible factor, they remain cautious as to issues of causality (reverting implicitly to a reliance on rational choice individualism that, ironically, sits even more uncomfortably with relational assumptions). The agentive qualities of the network entrepreneur remain essentially untheorised. Below we will show how a relational conception of agency can help to fill this gap.

We begin our reinterpretation with agency’s *iterative dimension*. It will be recalled that iteration involves a past-focus allowing the ‘selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action’. By incorporating emotional dynamics we have shown how iteration can be a motivation for change and disruption as well as stability and reproduction. The capability to use iteration to inform agency depends on the extent to which prior experience has provided the individual with emotionally charged

thought, mind or subjectivity’ (2004: 345). Our intention is to use Emirbayer and Mische’s model to give clearer specification to this process.

symbols that can be recycled to stimulate action, whether in individual thought or intersubjectively.

As brokerage involves working across group boundaries, IRCT suggests that we should look for IRs that produce and venerate EE-charged symbols encompassing such activity, and for individuals who play an active role within them. Iterative capabilities grow out of repeated participation, such that the symbols become familiar and ‘comfortable’ accompaniments to a ritual’s emotionally energising interactions (note that this does not need to imply that individuals are restricted to participation in a single form of IR with the same set of participants).

We hypothesise that, although such rituals will vary in form and content, they will share (a) a primary focus on some form of *joint activity between distinct groups*, and (b) a symbolic commitment to the principle that such joint activity is beneficial to the initiator. Condition (b) implies an element of competitiveness that could range from mutually gainful exchange transactions to benign or aggressive ‘conquest’ of the target group. Such rituals can range from the elaborate and formal (e.g., team sports, business takeovers) to the particularistic and mundane (e.g., negotiating a bargain with local traders, turf wars amongst local gangs). The significance of these rituals lies not in their concrete outcomes as such, but in the ways in which achieving these produces group solidarity and individual emotional energy.

Active participation confirms membership status and secures support from in-group members in perpetuating the ritual, manifested at the individual level in the enthusiasm and self-confidence induced through emotional energy. The more central their participation, the more an individual is likely to be empowered to act with initiative in this regard. Out-group engagement is encouraged and supported by in-group ritual. This combination of closure within groups and brokerage beyond them is recognised by Burt (2005); our model provides an explanatory mechanism for this process, both at the point of brokerage and as part of an individual’s developmental trajectory towards such a role. It suggests that closure will not automatically produce brokerage; it requires experience of rituals where a group’s internal solidarity is generated through some form of in-group/out-group joint activity. Where solidarity results from purely internally focused ritual, a disposition for isolation is more likely than brokerage.

IRCT suggests that, for those who have learned to gain significant EE-returns from a joint-activity ritual, establishing relations with an out-group will be an attraction, an opportunity for further EE gain. Our model proposes that, by recycling symbols of competition and/or collaboration, an individual can iteratively ‘pump-up’ this motivation, creating an agentic capacity to find and secure these relational opportunities. Thus, the more sustained and enduring an individual’s participation in forms of joint-activity ritual, the greater will be their emotionally-charged symbolic repertoire and, hence, their iterative capacity to produce relationship-bridging motivation. Given that brokering may often be perceived as risky or challenging (dealing with unknown parties), iteration may also serve as a means of bolstering an individual’s courage or resolve in moments of doubt. Such an iterative process can work intrasubjectively, consciously focusing on feelings induced by past successes and achievements (Katz, 1999), and/or intersubjectively, as other members circulate

confirmatory symbols by way of ‘moral support’⁶. By ‘recycling’ emotional energy, iteration goes beyond mere passive retrospection. It provides a motivating impetus, particularly so when it develops an intersubjective circuit, potentially becoming an interaction ritual in its own right. Burt (2000a: 20) gives numerous examples of how getting information ‘live through personal discussion’ is crucial to successful brokering, but offers no explanation of why the interpersonal quality of conversation makes it more potent than other forms of information access. As we have already suggested and will discuss further below, the emotional connotations of physical proximity are key to understanding this effect.

Our model suggests that, as it orients an individual towards action, iteration merges with projectivity – providing the symbolic raw material for imaginative travel. Where participation is intense, the symbols circulated within the ritual and subsequently, through iteration and projectivity, will carry a high EE charge that, IRCT suggests, will be reflected in the enthusiasm with which the ideas are addressed by the individual (i.e., their prioritisation within thought) and communicated to potential collaborators. Symbols pumped up with EE and so communicated, can appear to others as compelling, imbuing their ‘originator’ with visionary powers and offering a rallying point for collective action⁷. Here projectivity also merges with practical evaluation, focusing on how new in-group and out-group interactions can be matched in terms of emotional-symbolic complementarities. If a projected relationship with an out-group is presented as a visionary possibility, the reaction of others will be crucial to its development.

We have already suggested that some EE-symbol matches will be more fruitful than others for relationship construction, the guiding principle being that high EE individuals are more likely to associate with moderate EE others than with others high in EE, this being mediated, to some extent, by the symbolic context. A key agency issue, therefore, is how individuals motivated to engage in brokerage, determine the potential form matching levels of EE. This is certainly a key part of practical evaluation and, as we suggested earlier, it seems likely to hinge on physical co-presence and the ‘compulsion of proximity’ (Boden and Molotch, 1994). The ‘thickness’ of co-presence is integral to sensing and evaluating emotional signals as well as more cognitive forms of information. What Urry (2002) calls ‘meetingness’ thus becomes a key component in relationship initiation, where it may confirm initial impressions of others’ symbolic-emotional ‘potential’ and, equally importantly, convince them of the attractiveness (or inevitability) of a collaboration. For those who are concerned to maintain their EE dominance, meetings – formal or informal – will be an important component in consolidating their initial feelings about a constructable ritual. Proximity, in this sense may well be a ‘compulsion’ for this type of agency. There is evidence that successful entrepreneurs are highly active in cultivating possible contacts (‘getting out there’), prepared to travel long distances to develop potential business ideas, and that otherwise ‘good’ opportunities will be rejected

⁶ Burt (1998: 356) refers to Collins’s work on intellectual thought as one possible explanation of how individuals with experiences of more than one group might imaginatively combine ideas from both for new configurations.

⁷ If successfully enacted, this can provide a basis for charismatic authority (see Goss, 2005b). Collins (2004) offers examples drawn from evangelical religious meetings, (p.60), reputation-building in the world of business (p.86), and the role of firefighters in the wake of 9/11.

because the interpersonal ‘chemistry’ is perceived to be wrong (Nohria, 1992; Stewart, 1990; Cringely, 1996; Bower, 1993). We know comparatively little, however, about what actually goes on in such meetings and what influences a decision to continue or abandon, although it is possible plausibly to infer from non-academic accounts that an intense sensitivity to deference-emotion markers is involved (Author, 2005b).⁸

In addition to evaluating others, meetings also create the forum for building influence, persuading others to join a venture that is likely to be both risky and uncertain. Emotionally charged symbols/discourses can facilitate and shape interactions: ‘When several individuals value the same collective symbol, it is easy for them to evoke it in an interaction and achieve a high degree of focus around it. It provides a content to talk about or a focus for action’ (Collins, 2004: 151). Those who acquire relationship symbols highly charged with EE, will be at an ‘interaction advantage’ when it comes to engaging with others in a position to help their enterprise (and who can be expected either to share, value, or aspire to the membership that such symbols represent). Emotionally charged symbols should enhance the ability convincingly to ‘talk business’ (Rigg, 2005; Boden, 1994) and provide the intersubjective basis for the self-confident and persuasive construction of alliances, partnerships and commitments (Dodd, 2002; Pitt, 1998).⁹

An individual who has attached high levels of EE to competitive joint activity symbols as a result of previous interactions should be able to use this (not necessarily consciously) to gain influence in situations where such symbols are valued but less highly charged, attracting followers and supporters by dint of her knowledge and, more importantly, enthusiasm and focus (Author, 2005b). This is not to say that such emotional-symbolic displays cannot be ‘managed’ or fabricated in a manipulative attempt to gain an exchange advantage; indeed, this may be at the heart of entrepreneurship’s ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983; Hobbs, 1998; Smith, 2004). Similarly, symbols deployed without enthusiasm or authenticity risk undercutting an individual’s reputation and credibility.

As Burt (2000a: 22) points out, ‘There is no value to the venture if it only connects people already connected’, citing Stewart’s (1990) account of what entrepreneurs focus on, namely, ‘those points in an economic system where discrepancies of evaluation are the greatest and . . . attempt to construct bridging transactions. Bridging roles are based on the recognition of discrepancies of evaluation, which requires an edge in information about both sides of the bridge. Because this requires

⁸ Consider the following from the tycoon Tiny Rowland: ‘I have an instinct, a deep animal instinct for the chemistry of people. I would be aware of everything that flowed out of you when we met, from your eyes and your voice, and I would know whether we were likely to be able to work together.’ (Bower, 1993: 106). Accounts of Rowland’s business style suggests that excluding ‘challengers’ was a life-long concern (similar accounts of Robert Maxwell’s determination to establish dominance at meetings are common; see also Bower’s (2000) account of Richard Branson’s relationship with Randolph Fields the originator of the idea of a low cost transatlantic airline that became Virgin Atlantic).

⁹ This supports Baron and Markman’s (2003: 43) distinction between ‘social capital’ (‘the sum of actual and potential resources individuals obtain from their relationships with others’) and ‘social competence’ (‘overall effectiveness in interacting with others’), both of which have been empirically linked to entrepreneurial success. We conjecture that if such symbols can be regarded as equivalent to social capital, effective social competence will be achieved only when these symbols are charged with EE.

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

an information network, bridgers will commit time, energy, travel and sociability to develop their personal networks.’ (Burt, 2000a: 23).

Our model offers a mechanism, missing from structural hole theory, to explain how and why some actors behave in this way, i.e., why they exercise agency towards structural holes. In summary, the extent to which matches of symbols and emotional energy can be achieved will determine whether a bridging opportunity is acted upon or ignored, and whether it continues or is abandoned. The strength of agency’s practical evaluative component will influence the speed and confidence with which potential relationships are evaluated, initiated and nurtured. As the emotional pull of matches between those with equivalent symbolic-emotional resources is low (in terms of sustainable working relationships), the tendency will for enduring matches to be sought with those who normally operate within different circuits of interaction, ‘automatically’ reducing the risk of redundancy and, as the initiator (broker) is likely to be high in EE, also favouring those relationships where they can secure some measure of competitive or collaborative control.

By way of summary we will now formalise our reinterpretation of structural hole brokerage developed above in propositional form.

P1: Individuals will exercise agency in relation to structural hole brokerage in proportion to the EE they extract from competitive joint-activity rituals.

Here we offer three broad generalisations. First, that individuals whose participation in such IRs has attuned to extracting *intense EE* from such activity will *actively seek opportunities for brokering relationships*. This can be regarded as the highest level of entrepreneurial agency, producing both the motivation and capability for a sharp focus on relationship opportunities. Second, that individuals whose participation in joint activity rituals has attuned to extracting *moderate EE* from such activity will be able to enact a brokering role when, or if, a *contingent opportunity arise*. At this lower level of agency an individual will have the latent capabilities to enact brokerage, but limited motivation to initiate this. At this level the availability of structural opportunities may provide a stimulus, but these are unlikely to be actively sought out; they may be pursued, only if more EE-favourable relationship options are unavailable (see Author 2007 for further discussion). Finally, that individuals who have *limited experience* of IRs focused on joint group activity and who receive *little EE* from such activity, will *avoid or ignore opportunities for brokering relationships*. For such individuals there will be limited capacity for agency towards structural holes (although, of course, they may have strong agency towards other objects associated with other forms of ritual). Here the prospect of brokerage is likely to appear as an emotional drain, such that even apparently open opportunities are ignored, a form of behaviour that, if accompanied by agency towards other objects, may appear may appear irrational and egregious to others (see also Schumpeter, 1934).

P2: the level of EE extraction will be proportional to iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative capabilities

This proposition relates to the developmental nature of agency. As we have shown, the three dimensions of agency develop through an individual's experience of the interaction ritual chains that constitutes their personal biography. As an individual acquires participative experiences and emotionally charged symbols they enhance their capabilities for iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation and, hence, the enthusiasm and flexibility with which they can envisage and enact new relational possibilities. Thus, to understand an individual's level of agency towards brokerage, it is necessary to understand their IRC history¹⁰. This qualifies Proposition 1 above. As agentive capacities develop in line with experience, entrepreneurial agency does not need to be treated as a fixed attribute. In principle it is a capacity that could develop at any point in an individual's life, depending on the nature of their network relationships. However, the earlier in life a particular form of ritually-induced agency is initiated, and the more consistently it is enacted, the stronger is likely to be its effect in shaping individual action and the less such action is likely to be 'diverted' by contingent events that impede its exercise. Nevertheless, this means that entrepreneurial agency is potentially something that can be learned.

P3: the stronger the agentic capabilities, the more opportunities for brokerage will be successfully converted into relationships with reduced redundancy and greater opportunities for control.

This proposition relates to the matching of symbols and emotional energies and is offered as an explanation of the effectiveness with which some individuals are able to create for themselves networks with a high proportion of structural holes. In this respect there is a dialectical relationship between the active individual and their network context, allowing our explanation to go beyond the assertion that network structure, in and of itself, creates entrepreneurial action (cf Burt, 2000b). Rather, we argue that network structures create different agentive capabilities that, in turn, effect the establishment of bridging relationships. Interaction rituals are a part of these network structures, but their ability to build, through their own dynamics, highly differentiated levels of agentive effects, means that an understanding of their dynamics, can connect *particular* individuals to particular types of network activity. By understanding how individuals acquire emotional energy and how they symbolise relationships, we are able to specify where future brokerage is, or is not, likely to take place and how effective this is likely to be in relation to particular relational targets.

The model outlined above offers a conception of entrepreneurial agency that adds to our understanding of the influential structural hole theory. Rather than conceive holes negatively, as (hypothetical) absences of relationships, that are amenable to analysis only in post hoc fashion, i.e., identified only once they have been bridged (i.e., once brokerage has commenced; see Burt 2004: 349), a conception of agency allows them to be conceived positively, as the result an individual's (predictable) propensity to construct and maintain social connections – but a propensity that is activated in this way precisely because of that individual's network context. The appearance and disappearance of structural holes becomes a result of the agentive potential created by particular forms of network configuration.

¹⁰ This, we suggest, offers a more precise formulation of Emirbayer and Mische's propositions relating to the effects of 'changing situations' and 'multiple temporal-relational contexts' (see 1998: 1006-7).

Concluding Discussion

The three propositions above offer answers to the questions of why some individuals rather than others find the prospect of spanning group boundaries attractive, and why some individuals are more effective at it than others. Although used above to enhance or understanding of network processes this approach to entrepreneurial agency has wider implications. It encourages us to take seriously the issue of individual differences – what we might term ‘individuality’ – but without reducing this to a contextually marginalising individualism. IRCT encourages a focus on the situation as the analytical starting point, requiring us to place individuals within specific interactional settings. The temporal-relational conception of agency allows us to specify how relationally generated dispositions concatenate at the individual level to produce particular forms of motivated action.

By understanding the link between particular forms of interaction ritual and entrepreneurial actions, it should be possible to predict the sorts of social situation that will produce entrepreneurial agency and, hence, to understand why some individuals rather than others adopt this form of behaviour. To this end Figure 1 offers a generalised model of the processes outlined above. The diagram represents schematically one link in an individual’s chain of interactions.

Figure 1 about here

A given IR (1) produces EE within individual participants according to the level of their participation and the success of the ritual. This affective reaction is appraised concurrently through the ‘practical evaluation’ (2) of the situation’s unfolding emotional-symbolic dynamics and the ‘iterative’ recall (3) of previous situations (their symbolic content and emotional loadings). Where this appraisal is positive there will be a growing enthusiasm and commitment to the ritual, where it is negative, indifference and withdrawal, raising or lowering concurrent levels of EE and feeding back (via ritual participation) to ongoing practical evaluations and iterative capacity (5). Practical evaluation allows the matching of EE with other participants, iteration attaches an emotional charge to the ritual’s symbols. Together these shape the nature of projectivity (6), directing the imagination towards varying degrees of repetition or innovation in social relationships.

In general, the model suggests that high or escalating levels of EE are likely to encourage imaginative innovation and provide the motivation to turn plans into action (e.g., by seeking dominance within an existing ritual or by extrapolating the symbolic meaning of the ritual to create new forms of interaction). In contrast, stable or declining EE levels will support repetition or withdrawal. The novelty of this model is the ability to separate analytically the different dimensions of agency and to relate each explicitly to generative processes within social situations. Through the analysis of such situations (concurrently and biographically) it is, in principle, possible to predict the nature of individual agentic capabilities and their implications for particular patterns of action.

The second issue concerns the model’s practical implications. Here we see significant opportunities arising from the emphasis that is placed on non-cognitive dimensions of social interaction. Emotion has become a major interest within organization studies

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

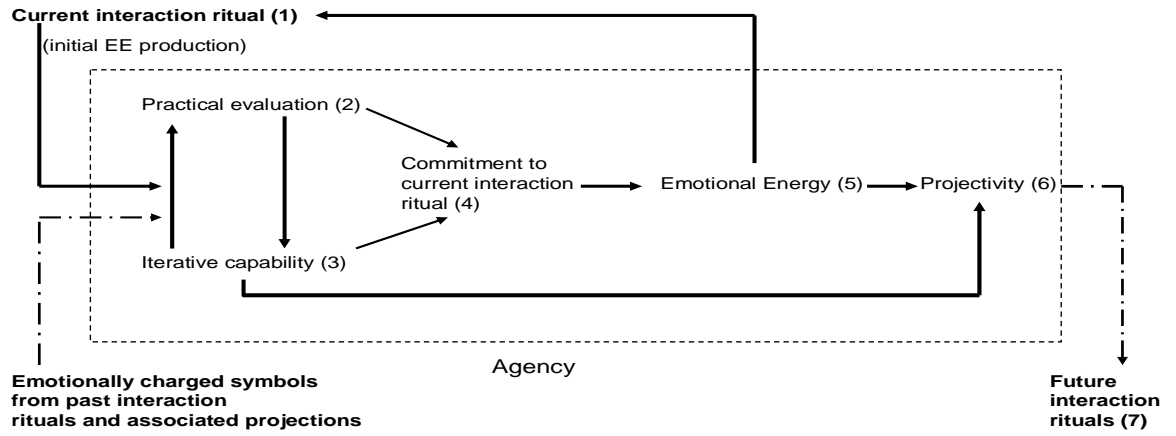
(see Author, 2007 for an overview) but has made comparatively little impact within entrepreneurship, despite extensive anecdotal and auto/biographical evidence of its relevance to entrepreneurial behaviour. Our model, by giving emotion a central theoretical place, also raises interesting issues about its practical relevance as a means of enhancing individual entrepreneurial potential. Considerable interest is now being shown in the application of ideas derived from cognitive processing as a means of improving entrepreneurs' understanding of their decision-making (Baron, 1998; 2002; Markman and Baron, 2003; Mitchell et al, 2002). A focus on emotional and corporeal dynamics could provide a valuable complement to these techniques.

To elaborate, we can return to a distinction made in passing above, namely that between social capital and social competence (Baron and Markman, 2003: 43). Social capital has been one of the key concerns of network approaches such as structural hole theory where it has generally been conceived as equivalent to structural position leading to the proposition that 'individuals who do better are somehow better connected. . . . an individual's position in the structure . . . can be an asset in its own right' (Burt, 2000: 4). As Baron and Markman (2003) have argued, and as our model has sought to specify, to be realised, such positional advantages must be enacted, and enacted competently. In short, translating latent social capital into a usable resource is an intersubjective achievement. As these writers also suggest this form of social competence can be modified by psychological techniques such as 'social skills training'. However, a good deal of this work has focused on the development of cognitive capacities better to understand the 'rules' governing social situations. Our model suggests that, whilst important, this cognitive dimension needs to be supplemented by a recognition of the significance of social processes that are, in part at least, largely independent of cognition, that operate through nonverbal forms of communication and 'back-channel signals' from interactional performance. As the work of Michael Argyle, in particular, has shown, techniques to raise awareness of these sub-cognitive processes can be effective in modifying individuals' understanding of their actions (e.g., Argyle, 1981; 1988). Helping potential entrepreneurs to understand not only the 'logic' but also the emotional and corporeal dynamics of their interactions and motivations may provide an additional means of addressing the 'puzzling fact that some entrepreneurs who have sound ideas, possess considerable technical competence, and demonstrate high motivation, still fail' (Baron and Markman, 2003: 57). Indeed, if our model is correct, it will allow us to push this question further by explaining, through an exploration of the sorts of rituals from which they extract EE, why some entrepreneurs seem to succeed at any type of business, but others can succeed in one field but fail miserably if they move to another.

Word count: 6648

Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

Figure 1. A model of agency and interaction ritual.



Putting Emotion at the Heart of Agency.

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