

Why Study Entrepreneurship?

Dr. Kheiri Nouh*  University of Djelfa (Algeria)

nouh.kheiri@univ-djelfa.dz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9122-9780>

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a fundamental question: why should entrepreneurship be studied as a scientific object? It argues that entrepreneurship cannot be understood solely as an economic response to unemployment or growth, but rather as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by social norms, public policies, gender relations, and unequal access to resources. The study highlights the lack of conceptual consensus surrounding entrepreneurship and demonstrates the need for a sociological perspective to clarify its meanings, functions, and social consequences. By adopting a multi-level analytical approach that links individual action with broader structural conditions, the article shows how studying entrepreneurship contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary social change. It also discusses the epistemological and pedagogical implications of treating entrepreneurship as a field of academic inquiry and as an educational competence.

1. Introduction: Entrepreneurship as a Socio-Economic Phenomenon

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of the global economy, representing over 90 per cent of enterprises worldwide and employing more than half of the global labour force. Consequently, they have become a strategic focal point for public policies and international funding programmes (World Bank, n.d.). In this context, entrepreneurship has transcended its status as a marginal economic practice to emerge as a globalized development model. International institutions promote it as a comprehensive panacea for the crises of unemployment and economic stagnation. However, reducing entrepreneurship to a purely technical-economic instrument obscures its deeper sociological dimensions. It is not merely a productive mechanism or an isolated individual activity; rather, it represents a new social-organizational form of work that reconfigures the distribution of risks, responsibilities, and social protection among three primary actors: the state, the firm, and the individual (Toumi et al., 2021; Kheiri et al., 2022).

From the perspective of the sociology of organization and work, it is imperative to transcend the figure of the “heroic lone entrepreneur” or the “charismatic business leader” that dominates media and political discourse. Instead, we must move towards a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the cultural, institutional, and structural contexts in which entrepreneurial action is constituted and reproduced (Toual et al., 2022; Badraoui & Kaddouri, 2021). The entrepreneur is not an atomized entity detached from social structures; rather, he or she is an embedded actor whose choices and opportunities are determined within complex networks of relationships,

cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. These interconnected elements form what is theoretically termed the “entrepreneurial ecosystem.”

2. Research Problem and Objectives: Towards Founding a Sociology of Entrepreneurship

Despite the pervasive dissemination of the discourse that “entrepreneurship creates wealth” and serves as “a path to financial independence,” critical scholarship reveals that the concept of entrepreneurship itself suffers from a lack of definitional clarity and epistemic consensus. It is deployed with divergent—and sometimes contradictory—meanings across multiple fields of knowledge, including economics, business administration, sociology, educational sciences, and economic anthropology (Kheiri et al., 2022; Acs et al., 2018). This conceptual disorder and paradigmatic plurality not only diminish the analytical power of scientific inquiry but also raise fundamental epistemological questions: Why must we study entrepreneurship from a sociological perspective? What added value does sociological analysis bring to our understanding of this phenomenon?

This article pursues four interrelated objectives:

1. To justify the sociological interest in entrepreneurship as a research domain capable of integrating analyses of work, organization, and social structures within a unified theoretical framework.
2. To highlight the significance of a multi-level approach that links micro-sociological analysis (the individual and actor) with meso-sociological analysis (the firm and organization) and macro-sociological analysis (social structures and public policies) (Toumi et al., 2021).
3. To elucidate how the study of entrepreneurship unveils mechanisms of inequality reproduction through the analysis of social networks, modes of finance, and gendered power relations (Toual et al., 2022; Ahl, 2006).
4. To connect entrepreneurship to the field of education through a critical analysis of the debate surrounding the teaching of entrepreneurship as a fundamental educational competence (Lackéus, 2015; Bacigalupo et al., 2016).

3. Conceptual Background: Between Paradigmatic Plurality and the Need for Synthesis

3.1 Multiplicity of Definitions and Approaches: Towards Overcoming Conceptual Disorder

Systematic literature reviews indicate that the academic field of entrepreneurship is characterized by a deficit of definitional consensus; each scientific discipline defines entrepreneurship through the lens of its own paradigms. Neoclassical economics, for instance, focuses on “discovering and exploiting economic opportunities” and bearing risk (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), whereas economic sociology conceptualizes entrepreneurship as a social practice deeply rooted in networks, interpersonal relations, and institutional frameworks (Granovetter, 1985; Toumi et al., 2021).

Conversely, social psychology emphasizes the personal characteristics of the entrepreneur—such as creativity, initiative, and tolerance for ambiguity—while strategic management approaches focus on decision-making processes and resource management within competitive contexts (Toual et al., 2022; Baron, 2007). This plurality is not necessarily a deficiency; however, it necessitates the development of synthetic analytical frameworks capable of addressing the multi-dimensional complexity of the entrepreneurial phenomenon.

Shane and Venkataraman (2000) propose that the essence of entrepreneurship lies at the intersection of opportunities with individuals capable of exploiting them. This implies that limiting analysis to the personal traits of the entrepreneur (a psychological approach) or to objective economic structures (a structural approach) yields a reductive and incomplete understanding. Hence, the critical importance of a sociological approach that integrates the actor and the structure within a dynamic analytical framework becomes evident.

3.2 Economic Action as Embedded: A Re-reading of Granovetter

The concept of “social embeddedness,” developed by Mark Granovetter (1985), is pivotal in the sociology of entrepreneurship. Granovetter posits that economic action is not socially neutral and does not occur within an institutional vacuum; rather, it is “embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations” (Granovetter, 1985, p. 481). These relations form a structure of trust, cultural norms, and mutual expectations. This perspective transcends both the “undersocialised” view, which assumes economic actors act as isolated rational atoms, and the “oversocialised” view, which perceives individuals as mechanical executors of social norms.

In the context of entrepreneurship, this implies that the success or failure of a project is determined not solely by individual competencies or the quality of the business idea, but crucially by the entrepreneur’s position within social networks that provide (or withhold) access to vital resources—financial capital, strategic information, social legitimacy, and institutional support (Granovetter, 1995; Kheiri & Herairia, 2021). This explains structural disparities in opportunities for success among different social categories: individuals possessing strong social capital and occupying networks rich in “weak ties” that connect them to new circles enjoy significantly greater opportunities to secure financing, information, and business prospects (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1988).

3.3 Units and Levels of Analysis: Towards an Integrative Framework

Toumi and colleagues (2021) present a systematic analytical framework distinguishing between three sociological levels of analysis, positing that each level raises distinct research questions and requires adapted methodological tools:

1. **Micro-level:** Examines the entrepreneur’s individual characteristics, psycho-social motivations, cultural representations, and personal narratives of success and failure. Key questions include: What drives individuals to choose the entrepreneurial path? How do family and educational contexts shape entrepreneurial orientations?
2. **Meso-level:** Concerns organizational arrangements, strategic decision-making, organizational culture, and relationships among actors within the firm and its immediate environment (Toual et al., 2022). Central questions here are: How are decisions made under uncertainty? What role does organizational culture play in project success?
3. **Macro-level:** Encompasses public policies, broad social structures, political economy, and national and international institutional frameworks. Questions at this level include: How do public policies shape the entrepreneurial ecosystem? What is the state’s role in re-engineering social risks?

Researchers emphasize that an exclusive focus on any single level weakens analysis and deprives it of depth and explanatory power (Toumi et al., 2021; Zietsma et al., 2017). Therefore, multi-level analysis becomes a methodological necessity for understanding entrepreneurship as a complex phenomenon in which individual choices intersect with institutional structures and cultural–political contexts.

4. Why Do We Study Entrepreneurship? Sociological Arguments Supported by Evidence

4.1 Because It Is a New Form of Organising Work and Distributing Risks

Entrepreneurship represents a novel model for organising work that transcends the traditional dichotomy between “stable wage labour” and “capital ownership.” It offers a third form—the worker-entrepreneur who combines the performance of labour with the assumption of risk and managerial responsibility (Kheiri et al., 2022). This transformation is not socially neutral; it is accompanied by a transfer of economic and social risks from large firms and the welfare state to individuals, a process aptly described as the “individualisation of risks.”

This new model reproduces new inequalities in social protection. While wage-earners in the formal sector

enjoy social safety nets (health insurance, pensions, unemployment benefits), entrepreneurs often find themselves in a state of double precariousness: they bear market risks entirely without access to traditional social protection mechanisms (Kheiri et al., 2022; Toumi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, entrepreneurship is presented in educational and development discourses as a means of generating economic growth, creating job opportunities, and fostering personal resilience and initiative (Lackeus, 2015; Correia et al., 2021). Yet these grand promises face significant implementation and normative challenges, particularly in contexts lacking supportive institutional environments.

4.2 Because Its Analysis Reveals Decision-Making Dynamics Under Uncertainty

From the perspective of organizational sociology, the firm serves as a living laboratory for studying decision-making processes in contexts saturated with uncertainty. Toual and colleagues (2022) demonstrate that the success of a firm does not depend on the individual intuition or “natural talent” of the entrepreneur, but on strategic decisions made within organizations facing fierce competition, market fluctuations, and resource constraints.

These decisions transcend simple binary choices (yes/no) and involve complex analyses of risk assessment, balancing conflicting interests, negotiating with various stakeholders, managing scarce resources, and adapting to rapid environmental changes. The quality of decision-making is directly correlated with the organization’s effectiveness and continuity. Thus, studying decision-making in the entrepreneurial context provides a rich entry point for understanding classic questions in organizational sociology: How are decisions made within organizations? What role do information, relationships, and culture play in shaping strategic choices? (Toual et al., 2022; Demirdag & Eraydin, 2021).

4.3 Because It Is Produced and Reproduced Within Financing and Trust Networks That Reproduce Social Inequalities

Sociological analysis of entrepreneurship reveals a central truth: finance is not socially neutral. It is a gendered and socially structured process that reproduces existing power relations and discrimination. In an exploratory field study on women’s entrepreneurial practice in Algeria, Toual and colleagues (2022) observe that women’s enterprises face structural obstacles of multiple origins:

- Weak familial and social support resulting from persistent traditional representations of women’s roles.
- Systemic exclusionary standards in the formal banking system based on guarantees that favour men (e.g., property ownership, credit histories, professional networks).
- Compulsory reliance on informal financing networks (family, kinship, women’s associations) governed by social expectations and masculine norms that limit the expansion and competitiveness of projects.

This analysis illustrates that social networks and cultural representations constitute informal institutions that practically determine who has the social “right” to take risks, and thus who is granted or denied the opportunities for entrepreneurial success (Toual et al., 2022; Kheiri & Herairia, 2021; Ahl, 2006). Analysing these mechanisms enables an understanding of how entrepreneurship, proclaimed as an “equal opportunity,” becomes in reality a mechanism for reproducing existing social hierarchies.

4.4 Because It Is Deeply Linked to Contexts of Gender, Culture and Social Structures

Kheiri and Herairia (2021) note that the trajectory of women entrepreneurs in Arab societies is not determined by purely economic factors but by a complex interplay of family roles, marriage expectations, and the cultural norms of the patriarchal system. Consequently, women’s entrepreneurial projects are often surrounded by a “fence of expectations and constraints.” Women entrepreneurs face a “double representational burden”: they are

required to prove their competence as entrepreneurs while simultaneously maintaining their “traditional” roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers.

Moreover, other studies (Kheiri et al., 2022) highlight the historical and systematic delay in integrating women into the academic and policy discourse on entrepreneurship. They advocate for reading women’s entrepreneurial experience within intersectional analytical frameworks that integrate gender, class, power, and knowledge. This signifies that entrepreneurship is not gender-neutral; rather, it is a field in which gendered power relations interact and are reproduced (Ahl, 2006; Brush et al., 2009).

4.5 Because It Is a Public Project That Produces Legitimacy and Re-engineers the Relationship Between the Individual, the State and Society

Public policies to support entrepreneurship are not merely technical mechanisms to stimulate the economy; they are political–social projects that reshape the relationship between state and citizen. They produce normative models of success, merit, and individual responsibility (Kheiri & Herairia, 2021; Miller & Rose, 2008). By adopting entrepreneurial support programmes, the state contributes to crafting a “neoliberal subjectivity” that holds individuals responsible for their economic success or failure, thereby weakening discourses that demand a larger role for the state in providing social protection and direct employment.

In the specific case of women’s entrepreneurship, policies of “women’s economic empowerment” intersect with strong local cultural structures. This raises critical questions: Who actually benefits from these policies? Who bears the real risks? Do these programmes transform patriarchal structures or reproduce them in new forms? (Kheiri & Herairia, 2021; Toual et al., 2022; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010). The absence of clear answers to these questions renders the critical sociological study of entrepreneurship an epistemic and political necessity.

5. Teaching Entrepreneurship: A Necessary Educational Skill or a Neoliberal Normative Discourse?

5.1 The European EntreComp Framework and the Competence-Based Approach

The European *EntreComp* entrepreneurship competence framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) is one of the most influential models in transforming entrepreneurship into a key competence that can be taught and assessed. The framework identifies 15 competences distributed across three domains: *Ideas and Opportunities*, *Resources*, and *Into Action*. It systematically links planned learning outcomes to the requirements of the contemporary world of work.

From an educational perspective, Lackéus (2015) highlights the potential positive effects of integrating entrepreneurship into education, such as:

- Enhancing employability and readiness for the labour market.
- Developing skills for solving complex problems.
- Fostering personal growth and self-confidence.
- Contributing to local economic development.

Simultaneously, he warns of fundamental issues associated with the difficulty of objectively measuring entrepreneurial competences, the persistence of conceptual ambiguity, and the risk of reducing education to “training in entrepreneurship” instead of developing a critical mindset.

5.2 Towards a Sociological Teaching of Entrepreneurship: Beyond the Business Plan

From a critical sociological standpoint, teaching entrepreneurship should not be limited to technical dimensions (e.g., preparing a business plan, market analysis, marketing). Rather, it must include training students

to understand the social contexts, networks, and mechanisms of inequality that shape the entrepreneurial space (Kheiri et al., 2022). This requires:

1. Critical education on the role of social networks in accessing resources and building legitimacy.
2. Analysis of modes of finance and the power relations embedded within them.
3. Understanding how public policies shape the entrepreneurial environment and distribute opportunities unequally.
4. Awareness of the gendered dimension of entrepreneurial practice and the specific challenges facing women.
5. Critical reflection on the neoliberal discourse that holds individuals responsible for unemployment and poverty.

In this sense, teaching entrepreneurship becomes a critical educational project that enables students to understand the social complexities of economic action, rather than simply a tool for producing “entrepreneurs” detached from their social contexts (Jones & Iredale, 2010; Berglund & Holmgren, 2013).

6. A Proposed Analytical Framework: Towards an Integrative Sociology of Entrepreneurship

To effectively overcome conceptual disorder and methodological dispersion, we propose an integrative analytical framework that combines the three sociological levels with four horizontal analytical dimensions.

6.1 The Three-Tiered Structure of the Framework

Level	Unit of analysis	Key questions	Methodological tools
Micro	Individual/Entrepreneur	What are the motivations and representations? How are self-narratives constructed?	In-depth interviews, life histories, discourse analysis
Meso	Firm/Organization	How are decisions made? What is the role of organisational culture?	Case studies, ethnographic observation, institutional analysis
Macro	Structures and Policies	How do policies shape the entrepreneurial environment? What are the power relations?	Policy analysis, comparative study, network analysis

6.2 Horizontal Analytical Dimensions

Across the three levels, four horizontal dimensions must be analysed:

1. **Network dimension:** Study how social capital is constructed and mobilised (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman, 1988).
2. **Financing dimension:** Analyse modes of access to financial resources and mechanisms of exclusion (Toual et al., 2022).
3. **Gender dimension:** Understand how gendered power relations intersect with entrepreneurial practice (Kheiri & Herairia, 2021; Ahl, 2006).
4. **Policy dimension:** Analyse the role of the state and institutions in producing the “entrepreneurial ecosystem” (Isenberg, 2011).

6.3 Applying the Framework: The Case of Women’s Entrepreneurship in Algeria

This integrative framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the limitations and fragility of women’s projects in Algeria (Toual et al., 2022), where the following intersect:

- **At the micro-level:** Traditional cultural representations of women's roles that limit their entrepreneurial aspirations.
- **At the meso-level:** Difficulties in building mixed work teams and flexible organisational cultures.
- **At the macro-level:** Systematic banking constraints and public policies that focus on "small projects" instead of supporting expansion.

Informal and kinship financing networks become decisive factors for project survival, but simultaneously, they limit growth and competitiveness, thereby reproducing an economic inferiority of women's entrepreneurship (Kheiri & Herairia, 2021; Toual et al., 2022).

7. Conclusion: Entrepreneurship as a Mirror of Contemporary Social Transformations

The sociological analysis presented herein demonstrates that studying entrepreneurship is neither a luxury nor a marginal interest; it is a scientific and political necessity for understanding the profound transformations in the organization of work, the distribution of risks, and the reproduction of social structures in the age of neoliberalism. Entrepreneurship redistributes opportunities, risks, and responsibilities among the state, the firm, and the individual. It clearly reveals structural inequalities in access to finance, networks, and social legitimacy—particularly regarding gender disparities.

Integrating entrepreneurship into educational systems raises epistemological, pedagogical, and political challenges that require adopting a critical educational approach. Such an approach must focus on understanding social contexts, culture, and justice rather than merely transferring techniques and skills disconnected from their social dimension. Teaching entrepreneurship should therefore involve teaching students to think critically about the economy and society, rather than training them to comply with a neoliberal model that holds individuals solely responsible for unemployment and poverty.

Accordingly, the question "Why do we study entrepreneurship?" is not a technical inquiry regarding the importance of a research field. It is an epistemological and political entry point to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between economy, society, power, and work in contemporary societies. Answering this question requires developing a critical sociology of entrepreneurship capable of transcending celebratory discourses and technocratic approaches towards a multi-level analysis that connects actor to structure, the individual to the organisation, and the economy to politics and culture.

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