

# Agency in entrepreneurship: preparing entrepreneurship theory for another view of context

Erik Melin and Johan Gaddefors

*Department of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Sustainability,  
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to explore how agency is distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements in entrepreneurship.

**Design/methodology/approach** – It is based on an inductive longitudinal case study of a garden in a rural community in northern Sweden. The methodology includes an ethnography of the garden, spanning the course of 16 years, and a careful investigation of the entrepreneurial processes contained within it.

**Findings** – This article identifies and describes different practices to explain how agency is distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements in the garden's context. Three different practices were identified and discussed, namely "calling", "resisting", and "provoking".

**Originality/value** – Agency/structure constitutes a longstanding conundrum in entrepreneurship and context. This study contributes to the on-going debate on context in entrepreneurship, and introduces a posthumanist perspective—particularly that of distributed agency—to theorising in entrepreneurship. Rather than focussing on a human (hero)-driven change process, induced through the exploitation of material objects, this novel perspective views entrepreneurship as both a human and a nonhuman venture, occurring through interactions located in particular places and times. Coming from the agency/structure dichotomy, this article reaches out for elements traditionally established on the structure side, distributing them to the agency side of the dichotomy. As such, it contributes to an understanding of the agency of nonhuman elements, and how they direct entrepreneurship in context. This theoretical development prepares entrepreneurship theories to be better able to engage with nonhuman elements and provides example solutions for the ongoing climate crisis.

**Keywords** Sustainability, Rural, Entrepreneurship, Ethnography

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Is nonhuman agency overlooked in entrepreneurship research? Can it provide new answers in times of environmental crisis, or is it perhaps omitted on good grounds? Over the last decade, entrepreneurship theorising has seen a coalescing of the construct of the entrepreneur and their surrounding contexts (Zahra, 2007; Welter, 2011; McKeever *et al.*, 2015). Before this contextual turn, context was often framed as a background to the actions of the entrepreneur, but recent contributions illustrate and explain how context matters to entrepreneurship, focusing on, for example, the business context (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000); the social context (Jack and Anderson, 2002); the spatial context (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018); gender (Roos, 2019); family (Astner, 2020); and social media (Jonsson and Gaddefors, 2022). Tensions between these two views have emerged multiple times. This has particularly been the case in conversations as to how agency should be ascribed to individual actors, on the one hand, and to the constraining power of context, on the other.



Complementary to these human-centred views, one has recently seen how the idea of distributed agency has entered the discussion of how entrepreneurship and context works. For instance, [Anderson et al. \(2012\)](#) have argued that entrepreneurship is a complex adaptive system in which “connecting” occurs. [Calás, Ergene and Smirchich \(2018\)](#) explicate how cotton seeds direct entrepreneurial practice in the global clothing industry. [Gaddefors and Anderson \(2017\)](#) even explain how a group of sheep changed the fate of a small, depleted Swedish town. Thus, there is growing indication that there may be more to the role of the nonhuman elements of entrepreneurship. This article takes this intriguing discussion one step further, investigating nonhuman agency and *interconnection* of human actors and nonhuman elements in entrepreneurship and context.

Theoretically, this study adds new materialism ([Barad, 2007](#); [Coole, 2013](#); [Braidotti, 2019](#)), a movement in posthumanist theory, to the contextualised view of entrepreneurship ([Welter, 2011](#); [Gaddefors and Andersson, 2019](#)). Methodologically, the study is based on an inductive longitudinal case study of “Green” (fictitious name), a garden venture in the rural town “Skoghem” (fictitious name) in Northern Sweden. In the year 2000, four returnees arrived in the small town and two years later they formally opened the gates to a garden situated at the mansion of the old iron estate. The garden became the local hub of new ideas but also a nationally renowned destination for garden inspiration and knowledge. Over the years, the garden has been celebrated for its influence on local development, but also criticised for not accumulating enough capital to grow significantly as a business. Just turned twenty, the garden is possibly entering a new era when old plans of building their own hotel are about to be realised. The case study covers a 16 year-long ethnography of this entrepreneurial adventure, inspired by more-than-human geography ([Pitt, 2015](#)). Between 2002 and 2018, researchers investigate how nonhuman elements such as houses, trees and plants act in and by themselves, and how entrepreneurial initiative travel between humans and nonhumans and across the garden context.

The purpose of this article is to explore how agency is distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements in entrepreneurship. The following research questions will be answered:

*RQ1.* How is agency positioned in entrepreneurship research?

*RQ2.* What is the relationship between human and nonhuman agency?

Through an exploration of these questions, the article contributes understanding to how human–nonhuman interconnection works in entrepreneurship. The findings suggest that agentic practice [1] can be categorised into different types, distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements across the garden context. More specifically, three different human–nonhuman practices are identified: “calling”, “resisting”, and “provoking”. Thus, as indicated by the analysis process, a smithy may not merely be a physical resource of bricks and timber, but also something with agentic capacity ([Coole, 2013](#)), conducting agency across context, and opening and closing opportunities in which to manoeuvre. Rather than being a human-driven change process, induced through the exploitation of material objects, this novel perspective turns entrepreneurship into both a human and a nonhuman venture, occurring through interactions in place and time. Thus, the article contributes understanding to entrepreneurship and context; more specifically how nonhuman elements have agency, and how they direct entrepreneurship in context. These results have theoretical value for the ongoing debate on context in entrepreneurship; and for the wider interpretation and role of entrepreneurship in the ongoing socio-environmental transformation due to the climate crisis.

The paper has been arranged according to the following design. [Section 2](#) begins by reviewing agency as a concept, whereupon it develops three views of agency and context in

entrepreneurship. [Section 3](#) addresses the research design and methods. [Section 4](#) introduces the garden narratives and discusses the study findings. Finally, [Section 5](#) draws a conclusion on the basis of the analysis.

## 2. Theoretical background

The literature review begins with a theoretical backdrop of agency as a concept; and how agency and context have been discussed in entrepreneurship from two different perspectives. It then develops a third, new materialist lens to explore the interconnectedness between human actors and nonhuman elements in the entrepreneurial process. The end of the section synthesises the presented theories.

### 2.1 A long-standing agency debate

The extent to which actors practice freely in their respective contexts has been a philosophical question since time out of mind. Questions surrounding the notions of fate and free will, of determinism and indeterminism, are almost as old as civilisation itself ([Campbell, 2009](#)). The conundrum of what constitutes “agency” has endured. In contemporary sociology, where the concept is studied extensively, it is widely accepted that agency is famously “slippery” ([Hitlin and Elder, 2007, p. 170](#)). Debates tend to be characterised by tension and bewilderment ([Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 962](#)), making some suggest that the concept is of limited academic value ([Loyal and Barnes, 2001](#)). Still, interest surrounding agency has remained almost unprecedentedly strong ([Barnes, 2001](#)). [Archer \(1996, 2000\)](#) goes as far as to suggest that agency and structure is *the* central problem of social theory. Whether one agrees with this or not, an observer can see that several ambitious efforts have been made to clarify the ways in which the two relate to each other (see for instance [Bourdieu, 1990](#); [Giddens, 1979, 1984](#)). These developments have in many respects turned into a “bitterly contested” ([Campbell, 2009, p. 407](#)) agency/structure debate as to what extent autonomy should be ascribed to individual actors, on the one hand, and to the constraining power of social structure, on the other. Entrepreneurship is, without doubt, built on acts of agency. But how is context discussed as part of entrepreneurial processes?

### 2.2 Agency view one: context-as-given

A postpositivist view sees context as given. Generally inspired by Austrian economics, particularly Joseph Schumpeter’s five types of innovation, this perspective assumes that contexts never are in equilibrium ([Shane and Venkataraman, 2000](#)). Since contexts are never saturated, the idea of the driven entrepreneur becomes important. In this regard, a significant theoretical underpinning is Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1965). Weber’s essay considers the entrepreneur to be the primary example of an agent of change. The entrepreneur is declared to be “the most important opponent of the spirit of capitalism” ([Weber, 1965, p. 58](#)); someone who initiates contextual change through “clarity of vision and ability to act” ([Weber, 1965, p. 68](#)). This reasoning is aligned with Schumpeter’s—entrepreneurs are pioneers that “act with confidence beyond the range of familiar beacons” ([Schumpeter, 1942](#)); they are “breaking up old, and creating new, tradition” ([Schumpeter, 1942](#)); and they have “a will to conquer” and experience a “joy of creating” ([Schumpeter, 1934](#)).

In more recent times, disequilibrium models ([Kirzner, 1973, 1997](#)) and strategic analyses ([Jackson and Dutton, 1988](#); [Porter, 1980](#)) have been incorporated into the idea of “context-as-given”. Another development is a more explicit discussion of context, as a complement to the idea of the visionary individual—entrepreneurship is about *both* the micro perspective of actors, and the macro perspective of structure. For instance, [Shane and Venkataraman \(2000\)](#)

see entrepreneurship as a nexus of lucrative opportunities and enterprising individuals; it involves “discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities; and the set of individuals who discover, evaluate, and exploit them.” (p. 218).

Still, while the importance of context has become increasingly accepted (Shane, 2012), entrepreneurial change is first and foremost considered something that comes about through the efforts of individuals with agentic abilities, who act to bend structure. How else can the idea of an “exploitation of holes” (Burt, 2000, 2004) be pragmatically explained? Consequently, common ways to describe contexts include “surroundings” (Cappelli and Sherer, 1991), “stimuli in the external environment” (Mowday and Sutton, 1993) and “situational opportunities and constraints” (Johns, 2006).

To sum up, “context-as-given” sees context as external background, something beyond human actors that is to be discovered and exploited (Shane, 2000; Eckhardt and Shane, 2003; Baron, 2006; Haynie *et al.*, 2009). Context may open, close, and/or shape opportunity, but it does not determine the action of the individual, and its structure is bent by the individual entrepreneur.

### 2.3 Agency view two: context-as-constructed

The last few decades have witnessed a growing critique of “context-as-given”, often voiced by students of social constructionism (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Searle, 1995). Although criticism has been disparate, covering gender (Roos, 2019), resilience (Vlasov *et al.*, 2018), sustainability (O’Neill *et al.*, 2009), among others, it has often, in broad terms, been directed at the malleability of context, which can be re-shaped and re-connected—but not by itself, as it requires an actor to do the shaping. The argument is that adherence to this view means that a select few “heroes” (Garmann Johnsen and Meier Sørensen, 2017), possessing uniquely-driven mindsets (Berglund, 2013) and entrepreneurial hands, are prone to be caught in the spotlight, to the disadvantage of other actors in context.

Thus, what can be called “context-as-constructed” has been increasingly taken for granted in entrepreneurship studies (Welter and Baker, 2021, p. 2), steering focus away from the traits of the individual entrepreneur towards the “where” and “when” of context (Welter, 2011; Berglund *et al.*, 2016). Research has stressed the importance of social (Jack and Anderson, 2002), environmental, and of late, spatial dimensions (Welter, 2011; Gaddefors and Andersson, 2019). The connections between entrepreneurial practice, and its historical, institutional, and spatial context have been established, as have the effects of contextualised embeddedness (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). Ultimately, this perspective does not consider context as something “out there” (Welter, 2011), to be used, exploited, and disrupted through an individual entrepreneur’s perception of opportunity (Alvarez and Barney, 2013; Korsgaard, 2013). Instead, it is constructed and affected by actors embedded within it (Bürcher and Mayer, 2018; Bensemann *et al.*, 2021; Melin *et al.*, 2022), who make use of the resources at hand (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2015).

Thus to summarise “context-as-constructed”, a common understanding is that a group of actors carry agency on behalf of, and together with, other people in the same context (McKeever *et al.*, 2015; Deakins *et al.*, 2016), turning “nothing” into “something” (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2021).

### 2.4 Agency view three: context-as-co-constructor

The time has come to introduce a third perspective of agency and context, here referred to as “context-as-co-constructor”. This lens is developed on the basis of “new materialism”, a posthuman, non-anthropocentric theory that understands agency as something distributed—*both* human actors and nonhuman elements have agentic capacity (Coole, 2013; Braidotti and Fuller, 2019). This view has been adopted because of the all-encompassing

socio-environmental transformation in the making. Through multiple environmental crises, the line between “culture” and “nature” (Haraway, 2003) appears to be fading, and thus the intermingling of humans and nonhumans is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Below this is explained through an elaboration on climate change, often perceived as the “elephant in the room” in 21st century crisis management.

#### 2.4.1 *Explaining the need for new perspectives through the example of climate change.*

At present, increased attention is being paid to the idea that modernity has come to usher Earth forward into a new geological epoch, famously defined by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) as the Anthropocene. Through industrialisation, and the globalisation that followed, society’s dependence on harvesting and refining fossil fuels has successively increased. Critics of this development have been heard for many decades. In 1957, Revelle and Suess declared that humankind is “carrying out a large-scale geophysical experiment” (p. 19) that will determine the weather and climate for centuries to come. Earlier, humanity’s shared decision was to silence this critique, disregarding the effects of skewed land and resource use within the fossil fuel paradigm: “one could go ahead and grab land, use it and abuse it, without listening to the prophets of doom” (Latour, 2018, p. 17). Predictably, the emissions connected to fossil fuel dependency have slowly but surely warmed humankind’s spinning home, now reaching a point where Earth’s changing climate is causing heat waves, hurricanes, flooding and melting glaciers, among many other geographical ripple effects (Cielemecka and Daigle, 2019). Geography, literarily originating from “to write earth” (Bourdieu, 1977), has been described as a framework through which entrepreneurial change occurs (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). With time, the once-silent earth has begun to react to what humanity has put it through (Latour, 2018, pp. 17–21). The planet itself is evolving into “an agent that participates fully in public life” (Latour, 2018, p. 41), resisting the environmental, social and economic predicaments forced upon it by civilisation. When the ground itself resists human action, and calls and provokes society to stride in another direction, does this not call for another “writing”, both of Earth and entrepreneurship?

Notwithstanding the escalating crises on Earth, many people have remained quite stubbornly occupied with “culture” (Braidotti, 2019), i.e. the human aspects of reality. Human exceptionalism (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013) has prevailed both in entrepreneurship studies, and in academia in general (Calás, Ergene and Smircich, 2018; Ergene et al., 2018). In essence, this study suggests that this owes to that one often has departed from materialist ontologies (Coole, 2013), anchored in a Western understanding of the role of humankind and the environment (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013), and of entrepreneurship and context. Since the days of Francis Bacon (the person often acknowledged as the founder of the scientific method), the notion of “Man” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 32) as the centre of creation has been prevalent in academia and, more broadly, in Western society. Thus, as it is (hu)man who carries agency across a slumbering, exogenous environment, exploiting or re-creating it, how could any other actor bear responsibility for its making (c.f. Passmore, 1974)? By extension, why should students of entrepreneurship embrace any other understanding of agency and structure? Seemingly, such questions have remained largely of rhetorical value, and the old agency/structure dichotomy has been preserved.

2.4.2 *“Posthumanism” as an agenda in entrepreneurship.* It has proved notoriously difficult for Westerners to look beyond human action. In a changing world, there is a growing need for embracing new philosophy. The present “simultaneously *expands* and radically *undermines* conventional notions of agency” (Johnson and Morehouse, 2014, p. 6; italics original). Considering this, “posthumanism”, an umbrella term for theory that breaks from previous anthropocentric perspectives (Ferrando, 2013), has emerged as a possible way forward. Theory is currently being developed in, for instance, eco-literature, feminist cultural studies, political science, philosophy, computer science, animal studies, and cognitive science

---

(for an overview see [Braidotti and Fuller, 2019](#)). In entrepreneurship studies a similar logic, particularly the idea of distributed agency, is slowly but surely taking root, with notable works including [Anderson et al. \(2012\)](#), [Gaddefors and Anderson \(2017\)](#), and [Calás, Ergene and Smircich \(2018\)](#).

To develop a third agency view, encouraged by what is currently simmering in entrepreneurship and elsewhere, this study employs works in “new materialism”—a specific movement in posthumanism which ascribes agency to nonhuman elements to “break through” the human/nonhuman dualism ([Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013, p. 97](#)). Naturally, as the posthuman scenario cuts across scholarly disciplines, there exists no singular explanation as to what posthumanism or new materialism amount to, and there is notable variation between key theorists [2]. The aim of this article is neither to review posthumanism nor new materialism, but to include nonhuman agency in an explanation of how entrepreneurship and context works. As posited by [Dolphijn and van der Tuin \(2013, p. 100\)](#), new materialism is “a device or tool for opening up theory formation”. To conceptualise “context-as-co-constructor” the article therefore engages with new materialism somewhat pragmatically, borrowing from works in philosophy, feminist cultural studies and political science ([DeLanda, 2002, 2006; Barad, 2007; Coole, 2013; Braidotti and Fuller, 2019](#)).

Independently of one another, Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti began using “new materialism” in the latter half of the 1990s to conceptualise a cultural theory that does not privilege “culture” over “nature”. In so doing, the aim was to propose a theory that could initiate a move away from the central dualisms in Western thinking—specifically nature/culture, matter/mind, and human/inhuman—towards materiality and processes of materialisation, i.e. human–nonhuman change ([Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013, p. 93](#)). More recently, students of new materialism have perceived change as a shared phenomenon that ought to be connected to both the human and the nonhuman ([Barad, 2007; Colebrook, 2014](#)), e.g. to entrepreneurs, others and the context itself ([Calás, Ergene and Smircich \(2018\)](#)). One often departs from a “flat” ontology ([Braidotti, 2019](#)); i.e. an understanding of reality that does not favour some entities over others. Here, the key point is that *both* human and nonhuman entities direct change—humans are interconnected with nonhuman others ([Barad, 2007](#)). Thus, as declared by [Coole \(2013, p. 453\)](#), “matter literally matters itself.” Matter is “agential” ([Barad, 2007](#)), i.e. self-organising, and lively and dynamic, rather than passive, relying on human actors to set it in motion.

This understanding of the role of the nonhuman has fundamental implications for the long-lasting agency/structure enigma. Ontologically, new materialism shifts agency away from specific actors ([Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013](#)). Instead of assigning agency to individuals (particularly to “heroes”), it is something inherent in the human *and* nonhuman, and thus should be ascribed to both. Agency is not determined (determinism) or determining (indeterminism). Instead, it is “distributed” ([Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013, p. 68](#)) insofar as that everyone and everything—both the entrepreneurs, and the contexts they (co) construct—have “agentic capacities” ([Coole, 2015](#)). This suggests practices should be in focus, rather than entities; i.e. the “shifting associations” ([Coole, 2013, p. 456](#)) of the human actors and nonhuman elements of context.

Thus human actors and nonhuman elements are woven together, holding society together as a durable whole ([Latour, 1991](#)). From this standpoint, it is possible to imagine entrepreneurship as a self-organising force in what Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, whose works have a bearing on new materialism, would call the “natureculture” ([Haraway, 2003](#)) and the “collective” ([Latour, 1993](#)), respectively; i.e. a nexus of the self-interests of the individual, and the collective interests of the larger, human–nonhuman context. As posited by [Calás et al. \(2018, p. 273\)](#), this makes entrepreneurship “not a structural social position for some humans”, but rather “agentic forces in contingent processes of materialization, human and nonhuman, which would require accounting for their actions.”

In sum, “context-as-co-creator” sees entrepreneurship as a phenomenon of *all* actors and elements through which, e.g. sense-making and sense-giving (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005), collective memory (Welter and Baker, 2021), stories (Melin *et al.*, 2022), etc., materialise. How are human actors and nonhuman elements engaging in entrepreneurial change through, and with, the connections between them?

### *2.5 Summarising “entrepreneurship and context” and the need for new perspectives*

Research perspectives in entrepreneurship take different positions on agency and structure. Essentially, however, they tend to be “materialist”—something that puts human action at the centre of the narrative. The line between agency and structure is blurred in a society marked by rapid transformation; meaning that the established understandings of agency are too narrow. Therefore, entrepreneurship studies need to embrace perspectives that better recognise the complex role of the nonhuman elements. Coming from the agency/structure dichotomy, this article reaches out for elements traditionally established on the structure side, distributing them to the agency side of the dichotomy. The researchers achieve this by exploring entrepreneurship through “context-as-co-creator”, an agency view developed on the basis of new materialism, that is, a specific movement in posthumanist theory. When investigating entrepreneurship through this view, one must pay great attention to its nonhuman elements, too; carefully disentangling them and studying what they set in motion in place and time, together with human actors. Thus, as is further explained in Sections 3.3 and 5.1, this theoretical point of departure has important epistemological and methodological implications for the concepts of agency and structure, and for how entrepreneurship occurs in context.

## **3. A methodology for exploring human and nonhuman agency in entrepreneurship**

The study’s methodology is inductive in nature and based on a longitudinal case study. The intentions were to explore a case in detail through reflexive interpretation (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018).

### *3.1 Choice of case—a locally grounded development project*

As its empirical point of departure this study used Green, a garden-themed recreational park located in the southern interior of northern Sweden. The small town, Skoghem, has approximately 6,000 inhabitants; half of which are located in the central town, the rest being spread out across the region. It is situated circa 50 km from the largest city in the region (which has 70,000 inhabitants) and 170 km north of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. Skoghem is peripheral (Anderson, 2000) in a geographical sense and depleted (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004) in a socio-economic sense, as it is suffering from a slowly declining population, and the closing down of public and private services. At the same time, locals share a strong sense of belonging and a collective understanding of what it means to live in the rural. A number of small industries along with local agriculture and services help the wheels keep turning.

Around the year 2000 four returnees, among them a gardener, together with locals launched a plan to develop the garden of the mansion at the old iron estate. The idea was to create a garden “the world had never seen before”. The gardener, Sam (fictitious name), together with friends invited all locals to a meeting and in this way opened up a collective project for the betterment of the town. The core members moved into one of the houses at the iron estate and soon the first, of what later would become seven “rooms”, was established in the garden. Parallel to planning and crafting the garden they organised a wide range of events;

e.g. a yearly hot air balloon meeting, an excavators ballet, and hosted an Argentinian tango orchestra. With time the garden developed, becoming the cornerstone in the branding of Skoghem and filling a wide range of functions in the local community. Artists and craftspeople clustered, school children came to sow and harvest, education for gardeners was established; and there were recurring events like a market place for locally produced food, and midsummer and Christmas celebrations. Thus and so, it was about more than building a tourist destination—Green became a locally grounded (identity) development project.

### *3.2 Early stages—exposure to “untypical” entrepreneurship*

The researchers were drawn to Green some twenty years ago, speculating as to whether anything entrepreneurial occurred in it, and in its proximity. Further exploration of the garden context suggested that this was indeed the case, albeit not an example entrepreneurship in its loudest and most typical form. The longitudinal nature of the case allowed for observation of how entrepreneurial change required strong inflow of hard work and energy from locals. The ripples in the town built up in Green were sometimes large but in the longer perspective perhaps smaller than expected. Slowly but surely, observations arose as to how agency was distributed to the garden, the mansion, and the smithy. Researchers therefore decided to broaden the view by looking into literature on new materialism, a field in which nonhuman agency is at the core. This resonated with what some would argue is the overarching aim of social science; i.e. offering a more-inclusive, fuller and more refined understanding of the world, rather than providing simplified solutions to complex issues (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Seemingly, there was a need to develop new knowledge on nonhuman agency and the interconnection of context (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019), making “the world more complex, not simpler” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 215).

### *3.3 Methods adopted—disentangling entrepreneurship through time and place*

As suggested by Nicolini (2012, p. 229), context is “always a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many types of material and human agencies that have to be patiently disentangled.” Therefore, Green needed to be observed through both time and place. Encouraged by calls for methodological eclecticism in the disentangling of human and nonhuman agency (Fox and Alldred, 2015), both qualitative historiographic and ethnographic methods were employed (Morgan and Smirchich, 1980; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018), investigating the garden from within and above. More specifically, two methods were decided upon to provide the reader with both an overview and detail of what the researchers wanted to describe: a historiography and an ethnography.

Primary empirical material was collected from a series of interviews, through formal and informal meetings with entrepreneurs, visitors, locals, municipal officials, and through observations in the garden (Alvesson, 2003). Additional material was collected through news media, digital media and website analyses (Czarniawska, 2007; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018), including material from Green’s website and Facebook page, a podcast made in collaboration with Green’s gardeners, and from news articles published in local daily newspapers. As often the case with ethnographic studies, where a researcher tend to have a modest influence on the studied context, sampling evolved during the course of the fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, there were plenty of field notes, numerous transcriptions, interviews, reflexivity, and copious use of the Internet.

### *3.4 Gathering and framing a case—a process filled with methodological challenges*

However, the methodological challenges were almost overwhelming—how does one possibly observe nonhuman agency and describe what one sees in a convincing way? As explicated



by Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2013) in their seminal cartography of new materialism, several challenges remain in this regard. Thus to address this issue, the researchers turned their eyes to more-than-human geography (Pitt, 2015; Wright, 2015; Dowling *et al.*, 2017), a field resonating with posthumanism (Panelli, 2010); and in which the idea of nonhuman agency plays an important role and methods for researching it are well developed.

In more-than-human geography it is argued that in the exploration of the nonhuman, one has to employ conventional methodologies (e.g. those used in this study) in new ways to shift focus from discourse to practice (Whatmore, 2006). As posited by Dowling *et al.* (2017, p. 827), research should “move beyond only incorporating the ‘voice’ of ‘the more-than-human’ in the methodological doings and towards the implications of decentring human agency”. Examples here are Wright, Lloyd, Suchet-Pearson, Burarrwanga, Tofa, and Bawaka Country’s study (2012) of storytelling in, through and with country, where wind, ants, flies and sun provide routine interruption in the stories being told; and Pitt’s (2015) work in community gardens, where the novice is “shown” nonhuman agency by observing how garden experts interact with plants. “By following experts’ signals, a researcher becomes more sensitive to nonhumans in the environment and gains skills for engaging with them in future.” (Pitt, p. 50).

By entertaining this notion, research was conducted over a timespan of 16 years, carefully disentangling human–nonhuman practice in the garden context. The smithies, trees, ponds, and plants were examined in detail; as were the humans in the garden context, as the investigation centred on the interconnections of these human actors and nonhuman elements (Panelli, 2010; Bear, 2017) in entrepreneurial change processes. To be inducted into the garden (Pitt, 2015) researchers engaged in garden walks, tastings and guided tours of the estate, organised by the gardeners. This made it possible for researchers to observe how the nonhuman elements in Green influenced the human actors, and how material artefacts were assembled and reassembled within it, without placing human action at the centre of the narrative (Dowling *et al.*, 2017). The following questions guided research:

- Q1. What was the “affect” of the nonhuman, rather than “meaning” (Whatmore, 2006)?
- Q2. How did the nonhuman “participate” in context (Wright *et al.*, 2012)?
- Q3. How did humans and nonhumans “share knowledge” together (Pitt, 2015)?

### 3.5 Analysis—developing distributed agency

The analysis process was twofold. The first step began with an initial multiple coding cycle of the collected material, followed by two cycles of theorising (Saldana, 2013) with regards to the above agency views: “context-as-given”, “context-as-constructed” and “context-as-co-constructor”. Through this analysis, researchers arrived at three different explanations as to how agency works in entrepreneurship. On this basis, the second step consisted of exploring how agency was distributed in the garden, i.e. how human actors and nonhuman elements are interconnected, influencing each other (Barad, 2007; Colebrook, 2014) in context. Thus, since insights from all three perspectives were put to use, the strategy was inspired by new materialism. As posited by Dolphijn and van der Tuin the new materialist tradition says “yes, *and*” (2013, p. 89; italics original) to multiple views, “traversing them all, creating strings of thought that, in turn, create a remarkably powerful and fresh ‘rhythm’ in academia” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013).

Subsequently, three practices were identified: “calling”, “resisting”, and “provoking”. Afterwards, storylines were sorted around recurring change processes, creating two coherent “case narratives” (Langley, 1999) that on different levels illustrated how agency was distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements in the garden. Lastly, empirical material was revisited, and searched for missing material linked to the identified practices, including nuances overlooked in the first attempt.

### *3.6 Sharing findings—the case for an anonymous case*

Before moving on to the findings, it should be noted that the people and places included in the case narratives have been given fictitious names. Some argue that the process of anonymising can become a “slippery slope” (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019, p. 803), making it difficult for readers to interpret the unique nature and detail of a case. Since this study wanted to share human–nonhuman interconnections in entrepreneurship rather than the characteristics of entrepreneurs, ventures and localities it was considered an appropriate action, despite the existing critique. Another reason was related to access. The researchers had no previous relationship with the small rural town, and thus some assurance of confidentiality was deemed necessary for establishing contacts and building trust over time.

Accordingly, what follows is a rich description of how agency works in a garden venture, inviting readers to engage with the interconnected nature of “nature”.

## **4. Case narrative and analysis**

This section presents and discusses empirical material from Green. This begins with two empirical illustrations; the first based on a historiography of forested land in Northern Sweden, and the second on a socio-spatially oriented ethnography. Thereafter the section offers an analysis of the case in regard to the three above views of context, and of the practices that were prevalent in the study.

### *4.1 A historiography of a garden*

Green thrives in Skoghem, a small municipality somewhere in the northern wooded areas of Sweden. In this area are Stone Age settlements and rune stones—a reminder of days that long since have passed. There are also several Iron Age grave mounds and -fields in the region, and even an iron forge, bearing witness of the region’s long tradition of iron production. Indeed, the municipality’s cultural heritage is in many ways based on the moulding of the lustrous, grey metal.

What is now a garden was once a manor, formed some 400 years ago. Historically, a manor was the main farm in a noble family’s land holding, granted by the county governor in exchange for state services. The grant also entailed tax exemptions, or the right to collect tax from the citizens. Thus, the place itself came to carry a distinct influence on the practice of its inhabitants—economically, but also socially. From the beginning, the manor house and its wings were carefully positioned in the topography in a way that signalled possession of the most powerful site of the estate. Straight roads were directed towards the manor and large trees lined up like soldiers and provided shadow for the residents. Surrounding the manor house at a respectable distance were typical red wooden houses built for workers, for storage of tools and utensils, for keeping animals, etc. By the small river a bit further from the manor there was a smithy, and other white stone buildings, from the time when the iron works were in operation. Close to the larger road there were a few additional houses built in the mid- and late-1900s. Like the buildings, the garden was a statement of power and social class, but also of what was expected at the time.

For a long period of time, the manor house was the node of all business conducted in the region. With time, however, as society changed with industrialisation, the manor was sold to entrepreneurs in the wood and paper industry. Over the years, the garden fulfilled different functions. It served the purposes of beauty and wealth, functioned as a kitchen garden with extensive cultivation, and at times was more of a nuisance for the owners. Thus, in the 1990s the estate was sold again—this time to the municipality. It is here the ethnography of the garden begins.

#### 4.2 A socio-spatial ethnography of a garden

Researchers arrived at Green for the first time in 2002. Spatially, it was outstretched in space and unfinished in character. It was like a small farmland with patchy, unfinished projects scattered over the fields and the meadows— e.g. an abandoned compost, red wooden houses in dire need of repainting and an old smithy in decline. The manor house and the wings were past their prime too, now a yellowish-white colour and way too big to consort with the milieu.

Green was human made, with an element of “the wild nature”; at times when maintenance was low, nature would take over. With persistent gardener efforts, one was able to shape the place. The structure of the manor set the outer geographical border for the garden. But so did the expectations of the times when it was built, and further on the ideas and needs of the people living in the house. The manor’s position at the border of the village, set high into the landscape, as well as the number of surrounding houses and their relative position, and the size of the windows and doors all declared power. The heritage and the history behind the estate as the home of the Lord was still at work as a marker of social class. There were inherent values in the estate, calling those with entrepreneurial hands to awaken it yet again. Consequently in the early 2000s the garden and the houses were re-designed to suit visitors rather than residents by a project team fronted by Sam, a gardener from out of town, in collaboration with the municipality. Back then, an old woman lived in the manor house. Due to an old agreement, she had the right to stay as long as she wanted to. She left the building in 2015. Thus, the garden was developed in the shadow of the architectural centrepiece of the estate and the manor house was excluded from the garden’s establishment.

After lengthy discussion, the smithy and the compost were given new life, and the garden was decorated and organised into seven different rooms. Eventually, there was a kitchen garden with its garden house; a herb garden; a rose garden shaped by iron bars, looking like a ship; a larger landscape park; and a more formal installation called the “forest garden”. The rose garden and the forest garden were made by internationally recognised landscape architects, something the people in the project took great pride in. The rooms were individual entities, but also formed a playful unit that made them into one garden.

When the garden opened the gates for everyone, it had both a calling and resisting effect on humans. On the one hand, there were people who felt uncomfortable entering “the private sphere of the Lord of the mill”; but on the other hand, there were some who thought it a great and inspiring day for the small town to open up the gates, long since closed since the glory days.

#### 4.3 Results and discussion

*4.3.1 Three views on the creation of a garden.* What follows is an analysis of the case in regard to three views of context: “context-as-given”, “context-as-constructed” and “context-as-co-constructed” (Table 1). How is agency appreciated in entrepreneurship?

*First*, the idea of “context-as-given” is that the value of the valueless resource will be transformed into something valuable because of the entrepreneur’s gaze and ability to make unexpected connections. In this case the estate was not in its prime, but still signalled wealth and power, because of its structure and size. Thus, there were different potential estate development plans available: the estate could be turned into a hotel, a nursing home, a business park, or a residential area. There were inherent values in the estate that could be discovered and transformed by an entrepreneurial hand. In this case, Sam had a background as a garden entrepreneur and the competence to evaluate the potential of the estate. The most obvious challenge was the lack of a mill or large forests to help pay for the development, maintenance, and operation of the estate. Thus, it became important to build expectations around the venture and convince the municipality and other important stakeholders of its economic sustainability. Sam, reflecting on the building of expectations, stated:

Dualist Lens	Context-as-given	Context-as-constructed	Non-dualist Context-as-co-structor
Analytical	<p>Philosophy Agency explanation</p> <p>Postpositivism Inherent to the gardener</p>	<p>Social constructionism</p> <p>Carried by the gardener, the co-workers, the friends, the locals, the municipal officials, and the politicians</p>	<p>Posthumanism</p> <p>Distributed to the manor, the garden and the smithy; and the gardener, the co-workers, the friends, the locals, the municipal officials and the politicians</p>
Descriptive	<p>Circumstance in focus</p> <p>The gardener coming to town; the gardener identifying the old mansion as a situational opportunity</p> <p>Illustrative quotes</p> <p>"My role has been very much not as idea generator, not as resource creator, but as catalyst, that one who opens the door to what already exists, actually. I guess that's what the question is. When you open the door to most things, it's easy to be a pioneer and I always have been. I've always practiced putting things into words, first listening in and then putting things into words, and then bloody firing on so that people get going."</p> <p>"I mean this idea that 'we should do something that the world has never seen', it was me and John who sort of coined it. It's because we are both somewhat rebellious and almost law breakers, organisational structure changers who just keep going."</p>	<p>The conversations about "what to do" with the mansion; the construction of expectations around the old smithy</p> <p>"I'm not used to it, that you have a mass media leash behind you, which I want to say is a rural phenomenon. Or, is it that a small business like the garden has become some kind of social institution that should be illuminated from behind and from the front, and from above and from below, which we don't really consider it to be, but maybe we have to."</p> <p>"This expectation, of what is to come, has been a huge driving force for us and also contributed to the attention being so intense. Honestly, it has also contributed to the following feeling, in my little interpretation: "hope it goes well for them there in the forest". You want to see that child with all the possibilities grow into something and it doesn't matter that we don't know what it will become. It is a basic engine, a basic force."</p>	<p>The manor's historically conditioned influence; the "wild nature" of the garden; the temptations and challenges of the smithy</p> <p>"The purpose of the rose garden, in addition to the extraordinary rose experience, is to gather experience regarding rose cultivation in our latitudes. There is a large range that is tested here, over 200 different varieties, in terms of hardness and soundness. Here, visitors can get many suggestions for their own garden."</p> <p>"I remember one time when a journalist visited. She admitted, "I've never pulled up a carrot, can I try it?" So she did—we pulled it up, wiped it off, and then she put it in her mouth and tasted it. And her first reaction was that "it's hot!" It's not obvious today. We have our carrots in the fridge, that's the relationship we have with carrots. But it tastes different when you pick up a temperate, directly harvested carrot. All the aromas remain."</p>

Source(s): Author's own work

**Table 1.**  
Three views of entrepreneurship and context (RQ1)

It is something that I often come back to, when we said in the beginning “We shall stand on our own two feet, basta”. If we hadn’t said that, then I don’t think the municipality and others would have joined, and said that we would be grant recipients for the rest of our history. By and large, operations break even, but it is the development work that we devote quite a lot of work to, which of course does not break even. The thing about standing on your own two feet can look different, it can be to have a collaboration with the region and the municipality because it is of value for the region and the municipality.

Another example in this regard is the development of the old smithy. The house presented a delicate mix of challenges: it had an aura of ancient charm combined with an inappropriate design, and long-neglected maintenance issues. The smithy was not available for the people in the project to use as they wished. Parts of the building were protected by locals based on the idea that they would, in a distant future, restore the place to its former glory and functions. Thus, a lengthy negotiation was required to make the smithy available. Over time, the conversation travelled from and across co-workers, locals, friends, municipal officials, politicians, and back again. Ideas about how to approach the smithy were sometimes spectacular but over time the flow of ideas stabilised around what, in retrospect, appeared to be “the solution”: the smithy was to become the entrance to the garden. However, the new entrance was a detour for visitors coming from the village centre. As it was not the shortest route, nor the historically-established entrance, locals felt deceived and, in the beginning, they refused to use the new entrance. In order to convince the locals, Sam, together with colleagues, built expectations around the smithy—“by crossing the bridge next to the smithy, visitors would enter another kingdom”. Finally, to shape the conditions for the new entrance to work, they developed the idea of a museum, and opened up a shop that became a substantial outlet for local handicraft.

Thus to summarise, it was the combination of making the smithy available, shaping the conditions for it to work as an entrance, and the managing of expectations among locals that finally turned the smithy into a working piece of the puzzle (Cappelli and Sherer, 1991; Mowday and Sutton, 1993; Johns, 2006), making “something” out of “nothing”.

*Second*, looking at the development of the garden and consider “context-as-constructed” emphasises the socio-relational aspects of the process. It is clear from the ethnography how many people engaged with the garden project and, to different extents, impacted what Green became. In the case, “the entrepreneur” was actually ten different people that together built expectations around the venture—four people coming from outside of the little town, four people from the town and two municipal officials. Outside of this tight core group, other people became involved at different stages of the process. One of the first official activities in the garden project was to invite locals to a meeting. About 120 people came to the meeting and formed, in turn, 18 thematic groups. Organised like this, people with different backgrounds and positions in the local structure co-produced images, ideas, and practices regarding what the estate could become (Welter, 2011; Berglund *et al.*, 2016). In this way, the context was socially constructed by participants from diverse backgrounds, and thus held a variety of interpretations (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). Somewhere in the interplay between people and actions, the context took shape. As stated by Sam:

It was not a matter of trying to *exploit* contemporary trends, but being *interested* in contemporary trends, making it the content of one’s life, one’s sustenance, instead of focusing on results.

Thus in sum, in this socialised view of entrepreneurship, “the entrepreneur” is a role someone takes on when required to do so during the development process. In this case Sam ticked many of the boxes of what counts as an entrepreneur, and had the capacity to step into the role. It was obvious how the project was in need of a subject that could be the front figure and, for example, take blame, apply for funding, hold speeches, and receive praise. A gardener able to step in and out of the role was essential for the project’s progress as an entrepreneurial plot.

It is also a good illustration of how many people actually took part in shaping the project, and thus how the context was re-constructed in practice. As suggested by Welter and Baker, “Entrepreneurship can be transformational, helping to imagine, and attempting to build something new on and even perhaps *with* (italics by authors) the ruins of the old.” (2021, p. 9).

*And third*, in “context-as-co-constructor”, is an emphasis on the human–nonhuman interconnection in the garden context (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013). This includes an acknowledgement as to how houses, soil, and architectural structure affect interpretations—in other words, agency is distributed to these elements too, influencing the change process and everyday practice. A good example here is the researchers’ exploration of the garden compost, located by the student’s garden. As suggested by Pitt (2015), the novice develops new knowledge of nonhuman agency through direct engagement with the environment, not by receiving information about it. About the size of a tennis court, it was divided into sections of built elements; and on a wooden stand, “don’t mess with dirt” was written in large letters made of steel wire. The compost was in different stages of biodegradation. Towards the right, sections were filled with identifiable garden garbage like straw and withered flowers, and towards the left the soil was homogeneous, black and almost fat. The row of sections at various levels of decay gave a powerful impression. The compost was at work around the year including a period of hibernation in the winter. The biological process, the perhaps-eternal repetition of life cycles provided by the inhabitants and all included elements of the compost built an essential link to everything that was growing in the garden. When growing rhubarbs, used at Green for production of for instance pie and chutney, the gardeners showed and explained how they applied “a generous supply of compost, so they would deliver nicely the next year, too”. It was equally important for Green’s famous rose garden: “the (roses’) soil consists of clay soil, composted horse manure. Roses like it. Above all, they like mullein. We add a lot of compost here every year.” Thus, it was like a magical biological factory constantly in motion—used for vegetables, flowers, and seeds of all kinds that grew and became small plants, later filling their space for the benefit of visitors and garden workers.

Thus from this view the compost was the engine of the garden, facilitating growth and directing the everyday operations. The human–nonhuman interconnection of the compost (Barad, 2007; Coole, 2013; Calás, Ergene and Smircich, 2018)— i.e. the gardeners having a purposeful plan for soil in all parts of it—was essential for growing vegetables and flowers over time, and also for controlling weeds and expanding cultivations. Without this soil processing cite, the garden would slowly but surely fall back into sleep.

*4.3.2 Distributed agency.* Seemingly, the garden is not a dichotomy of “active” humans and “passive” nonhumans. But how are human actors and nonhuman elements interconnected in it? To address this issue, the article now offers a more detailed explanation regarding three human–nonhuman practices in the garden, namely “calling”, “resisting” and “provoking”. Together, these influenced how the garden was created; and they affect what is happening in it in the here and now (Table 2).

*Beginning with calling,* Sam and the rest of the core group played an important role in the creation of Green. They discovered a slumbering estate, evaluated it as having immense potential for being moulded into something new (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), and set the development process in motion by calling for contextual change. However although these people were essential for change to happen, so were the practice of other actors and institutions (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). Particularly, the formally and informally communicated vision of rural development and growth in the community seemed to have been equally as important as the enterprising individuals. As expressed by Sam: “there was hope for blossoming industry . . . a space for those who will come tomorrow”. Thus without these collective calls, it is difficult to say whether the calls of the individuals would have been heeded.

With time, as Green developed, the estate *itself* came to call visitors, locals and others. Above all, the researchers remember how the beauty of the rose garden drew them in. Indeed,

	Practice	Calling	Resisting	Provoking
Human		The gardener discovering inherent values in the estate that could be transformed by an entrepreneurial hand	The gardener resisting criticism from news media, locals and others	The gardener getting people on board by building expectations around the business venture—"the idea of what will be"
		The municipality's calls for strengthening the region—growth, industries, employment and culture	The town perceiving the estate as an important part of the collective history and present, to be treated with care—not to be sabotaged by "outsiders"	Locals, politicians and others praising the entrepreneurial plot, encouraging and contributing to further development of it
Nonhuman		The garden as a cultural landmark in the community, drawing visitors, locals and others to it	The estate driving the entrepreneurial process through inappropriate design and lack of maintenance; biological processes "directing" what can be achieved in the garden, and when	The gardeners inducting visitors into the world of gardening through tastings, courses, and guided tours

**Table 2.**  
The relationship between human and nonhuman agency (RQ2)

**Source(s):** Author's own work

what the garden was charged with was elusive—but simultaneously distinct and real. It was almost as if the garden itself was calling for attention; and through the idle hands of Green's gardening experts (Pitt, 2015), the researchers were inducted into its world. They were shown how roses live in symbiosis with other plants and animals, e.g. important pollinators such as bees and bumblebees; and how roses "should not be stressed by wind and stagnant moisture". Thus through these calls, it became obvious that roses are lively and dynamic (Coole, 2013), rather than part of a passive background.

*Continuing with resisting*, Sam and the other people in the core group were on occasion subject to criticism; e.g. during the development of the old smithy, but also later when the garden had opened up its gates. The attention in local media was at times intense, and thus resisting it with confidence (Schumpeter, 1942) became important. As explained by Sam:

I'm not used to it, that you have a mass media leash behind you . . . Green has become some kind of social institution that should be illuminated from behind, from the front and from above and from below . . . We have chosen to turn a blind eye to it, but we are sensitive to the media because we depend on goodwill and a positive atmosphere.

Green would never have existed if someone from Skoghem had initiated it. Being a stranger is also a resource, so to speak. By nature, I'm a bit of a loner in some way, I'm almost never part of the general social life, making friends; there hasn't been a strong need for me. Thus, a myth is cultivated that can be a strength, 'he is not like us, that is something'. The fact that you are not really involved is a strength if you want to create something new.

Through a socialised lens (Welter, 2011; Berglund *et al.*, 2016), this criticism could be perceived as practice of resistance, too. During the years in Skoghem it became increasingly obvious that the estate was an important part of the shared culture and history, to be treated with care. A direct quote resonating with this notion: "Green challenges 'garden' as a concept. It annoys the visitors, municipal officials and local people who would like to 'recognise themselves' and find peace in 'the familiar.'"

Moreover, the years in the garden have also observed and experienced nonhuman resistance: the smithy's inappropriate design steered what could be done with it; and the compost dictated what could be achieved in the garden, and when (Barad, 2007). Another example, noted when speaking with locals, was the view of how inappropriate it was for "ordinary" people to enter the mansion. "It used to be the home of the lord, one has no business poking and sneaking around in it!" In other words, the mansion was part of, and sustained, a set of long standing relationships (Latour, 1991) in Skoghem.

*Concluding with provoking*, the core group brought about "new tradition" (Schumpeter, 1942; Weber, 1965) through construction of an entrepreneurial plot that engaged actors all across town. Importantly, however, the entrepreneurial adventure remained open to multiple interpretations. Locals, politicians and others actively participated in the co-production (Berglund *et al.*, 2016) of what Green was to become, negotiating and re-negotiating the process (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Welter and Baker, 2021). As seconded by Sam: "The idea of what will be' . . . Telling stories so that everyone sees their own story, the story must not be too definitive; it must leave something open. . . . I think it lies in the fact that people arrange pictures themselves, add and subtract, are creative in the very idea of."

Lastly, it can be seen that there was also provocation within the estate's nonhuman elements (Coole, 2013; Braidotti, 2019). By being inducted into the world of gardening (Pitt, 2015) visitors, locals and even researchers were provoked to engage in their own gardening projects, big and small. Another example is how the ancient smithy invited whoever entered to understand what was happening there in its prime, but also later when its heyday had long since passed. History is, to differing extents, alive in people and they connect with dreams of old by bringing nonhuman elements into play in their time. Depending on who stepped in, the reading of what the smithy had to offer would vary, depending on how the encounter between the smithy (physical building, history, dreams, etc.) and the human being (physical body, history, dreams, etc.) developed. The smithy could be turned into a spa, a café, a shop, a garage, building material for another house or a new smithy in old clothes (Gaddefors *et al.*, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The social sciences have been struggling with the agency/structure conundrum since time immemorial. In entrepreneurship studies, the self-contained entrepreneurial hand has been questioned and complemented by a recently growing interest in the idea of distributed agency (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017; Calás, Ergene and Smirchich, 2018). This article has engaged with this conversation by exploring how agency is distributed between human actors and nonhuman elements.

Conceptually, the study contributes to entrepreneurship and context. By developing three different agency views—"context-as-given" (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), "context-as-constructed" (Welter, 2011) and "context-as-co- constructor" (Barad, 2007)—the article brings about new knowledge regarding how human actors and nonhuman elements interconnect (Coole, 2013), i.e. influence each other in context. This has been shown through a historiography and ethnography of a garden venture in Skoghem, a small town in northern Sweden. Over a timespan of 16 years, the study centred on the importance of "the entrepreneur" (in this case a group of different people) as change agents—but also the significance of other people; e.g. locals and visitors. Interestingly enough, it has also captured how nonhuman elements (for instance a manor, rose garden, smithy and compost) play an active role in the entrepreneurial process. Agency is distributed between humans *and* nonhumans; through the practice of "calling", "resisting" and "provoking", initiative travel between them and across context.

As such, this study provides new knowledge on how agency is carried by nonhuman elements, too. This is something of theoretical importance for how "agency" and "context"



may be dealt with in entrepreneurship studies from this point forward. The nonhuman is more than “background”; in fact, it most often plays an active and dynamic role (Coole, 2013), “participating fully” (Latour, 2018, p. 41) in the entrepreneurial process. Thus, this paper has explored the need to reinterpret nonhuman elements in the explanation of how entrepreneurship and context works.

Earth’s many environmental crises pushes the need for a continued discussion on this research topic. As these researchers see it, entrepreneurship is key for many of the ongoing, planned and envisioned mitigation processes in the Anthropocene. However, there is a need for revision of some of the central components of the field. Specifically, and as addressed in this paper, a move away from a human-centred logic of agency/structure towards an interconnected logic of human–nonhuman appears important. Many of the contemporary issues are problems of social, rather than basic, science. Climate change was foreseen in 1895 by Svante Arrhenius.

Thus, as suggested by Bruno Latour (2018), perhaps the time has come to give context, and even the environment itself, the ontological status of a full-grown actor, whose story has thus far been overlooked? Employing the logic of “context-as-co–constructor” may facilitate such a shift, pointing humanity in other directions, providing new answers to old questions; allowing entrepreneurship to pay more attention to the surrounding nonhuman world; to reflect anew upon it, to appreciate it, and to investigate the many forms in which entrepreneurs and others encounter and interact with it in their daily lives. The beauty, durability, function, and potentiality of the nonhuman elements have always been there, hiding in plain sight. Thus, and as shown in this study, it is about time entrepreneurship follows human–nonhuman interconnection over time, to fully embrace the calls, resistance, and provocations of the nonhuman voices on a shared globe.

### Notes

1. In this article “practice” is used pragmatically, referring to mundane human–nonhuman interaction in context. Although this article is appreciative of the practice turn the objective of this study is not to develop theory on entrepreneurship-as-practice.
2. For instance, Rosi Braidotti has employed Freudian psychoanalysis, Manuel DeLanda is a committed Deleuzian, Karen Barad is mostly inspired by the physicist Niels Bohr, and Quentin Meillassoux first and foremost builds his theorising on a re-reading of David Hume (for an overview, see Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2013).

### References

- Alvarez, S.A. and Barney, J.B. (2013), “Epistemology, opportunities, and entrepreneurship: comments on Venkataraman et al. (2012) and Shane (2012)”, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 154-157.
- Alvesson, M. (2003), “Methodology for close up studies: struggling with closeness and closure”, *Higher Education*, Vol. 46, pp. 167-193.
- Alvesson, M. and Sköldböck, K. (2018), *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas For Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., Sage, Los Angeles.
- Anderson, A.R. (2000), “Paradox in the periphery: an entrepreneurial reconstruction?”, *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 91-109.
- Anderson, A.R., Dodd, S.D. and Jack, S.L. (2012), “Entrepreneurship as connecting: some implications for theorising and practice”, *Management Decision*, Vol. 50 No. 5, pp. 958-971.
- Archer, M.S. (1996), *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

- 
- Archer, M.S. (2000), *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Astner, H. (2020), "The marionette: embeddedness in a community of family-controlled firms", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 260-277.
- Barad, K. (2007), *Meeting The Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Barnes, B. (2001), "The macro/micro problem and the problem of structure and agency", in Ritzer, G. and Smart, B. (Eds), *Handbook of Social Theory*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 339-52.
- Baron, R.A. (2006), "Opportunity recognition as pattern recognition: how entrepreneurs 'connect the dots' to identify new business opportunities", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 104-119.
- Bear, C. (2017), "Assembling ocean life: more-than-human entanglements in the blue economy", *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 27-31.
- Bensemam, J., Warren, L. and Anderson, A. (2021), "Entrepreneurial engagement in a depleted small town: legitimacy and embeddedness", *Journal of Management and Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 253-269.
- Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin Books, London.
- Berglund, K. (2013), "Fighting against all odds: entrepreneurship education as employability training", *Ephemeria*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 717-735.
- Berglund, K., Gaddefors, J. and Lindgren, M. (2016), "Provoking identities: entrepreneurship and emerging identity positions in rural development", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 28 Nos 1-2, pp. 76-96.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977), "Outline of a theory of practice", translated by Nice, R., 'geography', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2021, available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (accessed 8 October 2021).
- Bourdieu, P. (1990), *The Logic of Practice. Reprinted*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Braidotti, R. (2019), "A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 31-61.
- Braidotti, R. and Fuller, M. (2019), "The posthumanities in an era of unexpected consequences", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 36 No. 6, pp. 3-29.
- Bürcher, S. and Mayer, H. (2018), "Are there differences in social capital related to corporate regional engagement in dynamic and less dynamic non-core regions?", *European Planning Studies*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 342-364.
- Burt, R.S. (2000), "The network entrepreneur", in Swedberg, R. (Ed.), *Entrepreneurship: The Social Science View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 281-307.
- Burt, R.S. (2004), "Structural holes and good ideas", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 110 No. 2, pp. 349-399.
- Calás, M.B., Ergene, S. and Smircich, L. (2018), "Becoming possible in the Anthropocene? Becoming social entrepreneurship as more-than-capitalist practice", *Social Entrepreneurship*, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Campbell, C. (2009), "Distinguishing the power of agency from agentic power: a note on Weber and the 'black box' of personal agency", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 407-418.
- Cappelli, P. and Scherer, P.D. (1991), "The missing role of context in OB: the need for a meso-level approach", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 13, pp. 55-110.
- Cielemiecka, O. and Daigle, C. (2019), "Posthuman sustainability: an ethos for our anthropocenic future", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 36 Nos 7-8, pp. 67-87.

- Colebrook, C. (2014), *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Volume One*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor.
- Coole, D. (2013), "Agentic capacities and capacious historical materialism: thinking with new materialisms in the political sciences", *Millennium*, Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 451-469.
- Coole, D. (2015), "Rethinking agency: a phenomenological approach to embodiment and agentic capacities", *Political Studies*, Vol. 53, pp. 124-142.
- Crutzen, P. and Stoermer, E. (2000), "Have we entered the Anthropocene?", *International Geosphere-Biosphere Program Newsletter*, Vol. 41, pp. 17-18.
- Czarniawska, B. (2007), *Shadowing and Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies*, Liber and Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.
- Deakins, D., Bensemann, J. and Battisti, M. (2016), "Entrepreneurial skill and regulation: evidence from primary sector rural entrepreneurs", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 234-259.
- DeLanda, M. (2002), *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, London and New York.
- DeLanda, M. (2006), *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Continuum, London and New York.
- Dolphijn, R. and van der Tuin, I.V.D. (2013), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor.
- Dowling, R., Lloyd, K. and Suchet-Pearson, S. (2017), "Qualitative methods II: 'More-than-human' methodologies and/in praxis", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 41 No. 6, pp. 823-831.
- Eckhardt, J.T. and Shane, S.A. (2003), "Opportunities and entrepreneurship", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 333-349.
- Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A. (1998), "What is agency?", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103 No. 4, pp. 962-1023.
- Ergene, S., Calás, M.B. and Smircich, L. (2018), "Ecologies of sustainable concerns: organization theorizing for the Anthropocene", *Gender, Work, and Organization*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 222-245.
- Ferrando, F. (2013), "Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms: differences and relations", *Existenz*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 26-32.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006), "Five misunderstandings about case-study research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 219-245.
- Fox, N.J. and Alldred, P. (2015), "New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 399-414.
- Gaddefors, J. and Anderson, A.R. (2017), "Entrepreneurship and context: when entrepreneurship is greater than entrepreneurs", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 267-278.
- Gaddefors, J. and Anderson, A.R. (2019), "Romancing the rural: reconceptualizing rural entrepreneurship as engagement with context (s)", *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 159-169.
- Gaddefors, J., Korsgaard, S. and Ingstrup, M.B. (2020), "Regional development through entrepreneurial exaptation: epistemological displacement, affordances, and collective agency in rural regions", *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 74, pp. 244-256.
- Garmann Johnsen, C. and Meier Sørensen, B.M. (2017), "Traversing the fantasy of the heroic entrepreneur", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 228-244.
- Giddens, A. (1979), *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Giddens, A. (1984), *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

- 
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 8th ed., Aldine Transaction, New York.
- Haraway, D. (2003), *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago.
- Haynie, J.M., Shepherd, D.A. and McMullen, J.S. (2009), "An opportunity for me? The role of resources in opportunity evaluation decisions", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 3, pp. 337-361.
- Hitlin, S. and Elder, G.H., Jr (2007), "Time, self, and the curiously abstract concept of agency", *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 170-191.
- Jack, S.L. and Anderson, A.R. (2002), "The effects of embeddedness on the entrepreneurial process", *Journal of Business Venturing*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 467-487.
- Jackson, S.E. and Dutton, J.E. (1988), "Discerning threats and opportunities", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 370-387.
- Jerolmack, C. and Murphy, A.K. (2019), "The ethical dilemmas and social scientific trade-offs of masking in ethnography", *Sociological Methods and Research*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 801-827.
- Johns, G. (2006), "The essential impact of context on organizational behavior", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 386-408.
- Johnson, E. and Morehouse, H. (2014), "After the Anthropocene: politics and geographic inquiry for a new epoch", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 439-456.
- Johnstone, H. and Lionais, D. (2004), "Depleted communities and community business entrepreneurship: revaluing space through place", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 217-233.
- Jonsson, J. and Gaddefors, J. (2022), "How online communities are important for rural entrepreneurial change – the library revolt", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print, doi: [10.1108/JEC-01-2022-0016](https://doi.org/10.1108/JEC-01-2022-0016), available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JEC-01-2022-0016/full/html>
- Kirzner, I.M. (1973), *Competition and Entrepreneurship*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Kirzner, I.M. (1997), "Entrepreneurial discovery and the competitive market process: an Austrian approach", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 60-85.
- Korsgaard, S. (2013), "It's really out there: a review of the critique of the discovery view of opportunities", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 130-148.
- Korsgaard, S., Müller, S. and Tanvig, H.W. (2015), "Rural entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in the rural-between place and space", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 5-26.
- Korsgaard, S., Müller, S. and Welter, F. (2021), "It's right nearby: how entrepreneurs use spatial bricolage to overcome resource constraints", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 33 Nos 1-2, pp. 147-173.
- Langley, A. (1999), "Strategies for theorizing from process data", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 691-710.
- Latour, B. (1991), "Technology is society made durable", in Law, J. (Ed.), *Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*, Routledge, London, pp. 103-131.
- Latour, B. (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, Translated by C. Porter, Prentice Hall, London.
- Latour, B. (2018), *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Loyal, S. and Barnes, B. (2001), "'Agency' as a red herring in social theory", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 507-524.
- McKeever, E., Anderson, A. and Jack, S. (2014), "Entrepreneurship and mutuality: social capital in processes and practices", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 26 Nos 5-6, pp. 453-477.
- McKeever, E., Jack, S. and Anderson, A. (2015), "Embedded entrepreneurship in the creative re-construction of place", *Journal of Business Venturing*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 50-65.

- Melin, E., Gaddefors, J. and Ferguson, R. (2022), "The moral of the story: 'populism' and 'activism' in entrepreneurship", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 34 Nos 9-10, pp. 765-787.
- Morgan, G. and Smircich, L. (1980), "The case for qualitative research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 491-500.
- Mowday, R.T. and Sutton, R.I. (1993), "Organizational behavior: linking individuals and groups to organizational contexts", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 44, p. 195.
- Müller, S. and Korsgaard, S. (2018), "Resources and bridging: the role of spatial context in rural entrepreneurship", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 30 Nos 1-2, pp. 224-255.
- Nicholson, L. and Anderson, A.R. (2005), "News and nuances of the entrepreneurial myth and metaphor: linguistic games in entrepreneurial sense-making and sense-giving", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 153-172.
- Nicolini, D. (2012), *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization: An Introduction*, 1st ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- O'Neill, G.D., Jr., Hershauer, J.C. and Golden, J.S. (2009), "The cultural context of sustainability entrepreneurship", *Greener Management International*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 33-35, doi: [10.9774/GLEAF.3062.2006.au.00005](https://doi.org/10.9774/GLEAF.3062.2006.au.00005).
- Panelli, R. (2010), "More-than-human social geographies: posthuman and other possibilities", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 79-87.
- Passmore, J. (1974), *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*, Duckworth, London.
- Pitt, H. (2015), "On showing and being shown plants – a guide to methods for more-than-human geography", *Area*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 48-55.
- Porter, M.E. (1980), "Industry structure and competitive strategy: keys to profitability", *Financial Analysts Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 30-41.
- Revelle, R. and Suess, H.E. (1957), "Carbon dioxide exchange between the atmosphere and ocean, and the question of an increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> during the past decades", *Tellus*, Vol. 9 No. 18.
- Roos, A. (2019), "Embeddedness in context: understanding gender in a female entrepreneurship network", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 31 Nos 3-4, pp. 279-292.
- Saldana, J. (2013), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed., Sage, London.
- Schumpeter, J.A. (1934 (2008)), *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*. Transl. By Redvers Opie, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, London.
- Schumpeter, J.A. (1942), *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed., George Allen and Unwin, London, 1976.
- Searle, J.R. (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Shane, S. (2000), "Prior knowledge and the discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities", *Organization Science*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 448-469.
- Shane, S. (2012), "Reflections on the 2010 AMR decade award: delivering on the promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 10-20.
- Shane, S. and Venkataraman, S. (2000), "The promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25, pp. 217-226.
- Steyaert, C. and Katz, J. (2004), "Reclaiming the space of entrepreneurship in society: geographical, discursive and social dimensions", *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 179-196.
- Vlasov, M., Bonnedahl, K.J. and Vincze, Z. (2018), "Entrepreneurship for resilience: embeddedness in place and in trans-local grassroots networks", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 374-394.

- 
- Weber, M. (1965), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Translated by T. Parsons, Unwin University Books, London.
- Welter, F. (2011), "Contextualizing entrepreneurship: conceptual challenges and ways forward", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 165-184.
- Welter, F. and Baker, T. (2021), "Moving contexts onto new roads: clues from other disciplines", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 1154-1175.
- Whatmore, S. (2006), "Materialist returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world", *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 600-609.
- Wright, S. (2015), "More-than-human, emergent belongings: a weak theory approach", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 391-411.
- Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Suchet-Pearson, S., Burarrwanga, L., Tofa, M. and Country, B. (2012), "Telling stories in, through and with Country: engaging with Indigenous and more-than-human methodologies at Bawaka, NE Australia", *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 39-60.
- Zahra, S.A. (2007), "Contextualizing theory building in entrepreneurship research", *Journal of Business Venturing*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 443-452.

**Corresponding author**

Erik Melin can be contacted at: [erik.melin@slu.se](mailto:erik.melin@slu.se)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)