

What's interesting in entrepreneurial education research? Identifying conversants sharing common interests in the field

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, the authors develop knowledge and insights on how the perception of interestingness influences the structure and focus of conversations in entrepreneurial education (EE) research. In particular, the authors elaborate on what is perceived as interesting among different subgroups of EE researchers, and not least, how EE researchers can identify and engage in scholarly conversation within the field.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on a unique database with web-based responses from 465 EE researchers from around the world. The authors conduct analyses of both open-ended and closed questions. The open-ended questions are analyzed by inductive categorization. The closed questions are subject to factor and cluster analyses.

Findings – The findings suggest that EE research is a topic-oriented field, characterized by a strong focus on novel and challenging research issues. In addition, the field is individualistic and fragmented, and the perception of interestingness differs between five subgroups of EE researchers, whose members have a somewhat different perception of interestingness. Accordingly, the authors also find different core conversations going on within the field. Obviously, these conversations tend to be triggered by the field's obsession with novelty and challenging research, but several conversations are related to practically relevant research, as well as methodological and theoretical discussions.



Originality/value – This is the first study to elaborate on the perception of interestingness among EE researchers and the conversations going on within the field. In the study the authors have explored the characteristics of EE research based on the perception of interestingness among the researchers within the field. In this respect, this study contributes insights on how current and aspiring EE researchers can find and build scholarly conversations embedded in passionate interest, while concurrently disseminating and accumulating knowledge on EE together with like-minded peers.

Keywords Enterprise education, Entrepreneurship education, Entrepreneurial education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Research in entrepreneurial education [1] (EE) can be regarded as a “hot topic” that has attracted significant scholarly interest within entrepreneurship studies (Landström and Harirchi, 2019). Consequently, the research on EE has grown significantly in recent years when measured by the number of researchers, the number of journals and conferences dedicated to EE research and the number of published articles (Duran-Sanchez *et al.*, 2018; Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2020). The development has led to an impressive landscape of works on the teaching and learning of entrepreneurship that provide ample opportunities for building conversations and social networks as well as individual research profiles among EE researchers (Neck and Corbett, 2018; Weaver *et al.*, 2020).

Building a research profile in a growing scholarly field implies developing social and collaborative ties with researchers who share similar research interests (Mitchell and Dino, 2011; Frank and Landström, 2016). This argumentation is in line with Huff (1999), who states that it is possible to identify subgroups of scholars within a research field who understand the world in different ways, focus on somewhat different research problems and find different issues interesting. According to Huff, scholars need to identify the audiences or subgroups that are attracted to similar issues and problems, choose the most important “conversants”, enter into their conversation and ask the question (p. 9): “What are the most interesting things I can add to the conversation?”

Approaching research fields through the lens of conversations accentuates the social dimensions of scholarly research (Landström and Harirchi, 2018). Perceptions of interestingness, i.e. feelings or emotions that evoke attention because something is intriguing, engaging or unusual (Silvia, 2006), are something that makes researchers relate to and interact with one another (Gartner, 2013). Moreover, conversations embedded in passionate interest support the expansion of collaborative networks, which enables larger groups of academics and professionals to exchange ideas and work together on projects that benefit research and teaching practices (Weaver *et al.*, 2020; see also; Frank and Landström, 2016).

However, despite the general notion that interestingness plays a key role in building research excellence (Davis, 1971; Mitchell and Dino, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) there is little guidance when it comes to how interestingness influences the way research fields are organized and structured in young and growing research areas such as EE. The bulk of studies that examine various angles of interestingness used management studies as their general point of departure (e.g. Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Das and Long, 2010; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013), which is a far more mature field of research compared to EE. Moreover, previous studies that address interestingness in entrepreneurship studies (e.g. Frank and Landström, 2016; Landström and Harirchi, 2019) lack the focus and granularity needed to understand perceptions of interestingness in EE research. While connected to the broader domain of entrepreneurship studies, the EE research field is situated at the intersection between different disciplinary domains [2], which results in a distinctive subfield of research with a largely unique profile (Neck and Corbett, 2018; Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020). Hence, it is necessary to develop more context-sensitive understandings of interestingness in EE that take the specificities of the research field into account. Following this line of argumentation,

the aim of the study is to advance the understanding of how perceptions of interestingness influence the structure and focus of conversations in EE research.

Our study contributes in several ways. It is the first study to elaborate on the perception of interestingness among researchers in EE – a young and growing research field within the broader domain of entrepreneurship studies (e.g. [Duran-Sanchez et al., 2018](#); [Gabrielsson et al., 2020](#)). Building on a unique database with web-based responses from 465 EE researchers from around the world, our analyses and empirical findings enable us to provide insights into how perceptions of interestingness among subgroups of EE researchers are reflected in the way the conversations within the field are organized and structured. In addition, we advance knowledge about the role of scholarly conversations (e.g. [Huff, 1999](#)) for channeling and coordinating efforts in the young and growing EE research field. In this context, our findings show that conversations embedded in passionate interest provide a fertile ground for engaging in particular topics, methods and ways of reasoning in EE research.

Our findings are valuable and useful for scholars interested in the state and development of EE scholarship (e.g. [Neck and Corbett, 2018](#)). EE is a young and growing research field and detailed analyses of the way conversations are organized and structured encourage reflections on where the field is heading. In this particular context, the study highlights the importance of intrinsic and personal interests of individual researchers for identifying like-minded peers and building conversations in the research field. Moreover, the findings offer advice and guidance to doctoral students and scholars entering the field for engaging in conversations based on their passionate interest. In this respect, the study provides valuable insights into the pluralism of EE research where different subgroups of scholars move the research field forward based on their collectively held beliefs about what is perceived as interesting. Such focus encourages the integrity and relevance of EE scholarship in contrast to the “publish or perish” culture that has come to dominate much academic research (e.g. [Moosa, 2018](#); [Huse, 2020](#)).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: [Section 2](#) includes a discussion about previous research on the perception of interestingness within academia and leads to the formulation of a number of research questions that form the basis for the rest of the paper. In [Section 3](#), the research method applied in the study is described, including the web-based survey and the analysis. [Section 4](#) includes the empirical results describing what researchers in EE perceive as interesting (and uninteresting) in EE research, followed in [Section 5](#) by an analysis of how perceptions of interestingness in EE research differ between subgroups of EE researchers. In [Section 6](#) the discussion elaborate on how the different perceptions will affect the focus and characteristics of conversations going on within the research field and how researchers can engage in conversations centered on common interest. Finally, in [Section 7](#), we draw some conclusions and suggest implications for the future development of EE research as well as how current and aspiring EE researchers can identify conversants sharing common interests in the field.

2. Interestingness as an important part of scholarly conversations in EE research

A starting point for our study is that researchers’ perceptions of interestingness influence the way the EE field becomes organized and structured, which in turn provide a focus for how they engage in different scholarly conversations within the EE field. At the same time, interestingness is a complex and multidimensional concept, and in this section we will elaborate on our knowledge of interestingness ([Subsection 2.2](#)), leading to the formulating of a couple of research questions that will guide the rest of paper

(Subsection 2.3). However, we start with a brief description of EE as a research field (Subsection 2.1).

2.1 EE as a field of research

EE constitutes a young field of research characterized by high growth and extensive changes (Duran-Sanchez *et al.*, 2018) – evolving toward a field in its own right (Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2020). Compared to more mature fields of research, the EE research field is characterized by less-developed constructs and models and a high degree of open-ended inquiries (e.g. Edmondson and Mcmanus, 2007). Studies have depicted the EE field as having a diverse multi-centric structure built around a range of largely disconnected core themes (Loi *et al.*, 2016; Fellnhofner, 2019). Moreover, there is a relatively diverse pool of theories and teaching methods in the field (Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020), with large variations in what EE implies in the classroom in relation to course content (Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Fayolle, 2013) and learning outcomes (Mandel and Noyes, 2016; Scott *et al.*, 2016). Thus, there is little co-ordination of results or problems in the research field and EE researchers can thus deal with fairly broad problems and issues in a relatively diffuse manner.

In this particular context, we expect the intrinsic and personal interests of individual researchers to be a markedly influential driver of new research initiatives as well as building conversations in EE research. Engaging in scholarly conversations based on personal interests is a means of building enthusiasm and ensuring progress in the field (Fayolle, 2013), and also something that keeps certain groups of researchers together (Gartner, 2013; Frank and Landström, 2016). On the other hand, different views on what is perceived as interesting will support the development of parallel conversations in a research field that over time may depart in different directions (Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2020). Conversations driven by passionate interest may thus serve as an imperceptible coordinator of scholarly efforts in EE research.

2.2 Interestingness in research – what do we know?

Researchers' subjective and intrinsic perception of interestingness plays a crucial role in science, for example, in initiating new research projects, and in building a research profile within the field. Research takes time, as an article may take a couple of years to complete, while a PhD thesis requires even more time. Thus, an intrinsic interest in an issue that the researcher finds intriguing, engaging and fascinating will be crucial for sustaining the intensive effort over a long period (Tsui *et al.*, 2007; Shepherd *et al.*, 2021). The opposite – a research project that the researcher does not find interesting – often turns out to be a self-inflicted torture, the reason for unfinished papers and dissertations and failure to build a sustainable research profile over the course of one's career.

2.2.1 Interestingness as something counterintuitive and novel. One of the most influential works on interestingness is Murray Davis' seminal work "That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology" (1971). Davis addresses interestingness in conceptual works, and in the article he poses the question: How do theories that are considered interesting differ from those that are regarded as non-interesting? His answer is that researchers are considered "great" not because their theories are true, but because their theories are "interesting" in the sense that they provide counterintuitive arguments that challenge the assumptions held by their audience. The formula for counterintuitive arguments in Davis' thinking is that "What seems to be X is in reality non-X" (p. 313).

One issue that has been discussed concerns how challenging a theory can be in order to be perceived as interesting. Garfinkel (1967; see also Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) argues that a theory will be regarded as interesting if it challenges accepted truths and taken-for-granted beliefs. If it merely conforms to the taken-for-granted assumptions, the audience will reject its

value and the response will be “of course!”, “that’s obvious!” or “everybody knows that!”. However, if the theory challenges the assumptions of the audience too much, the reaction will be the opposite, “that’s absurd!”. Thus, in order to be perceived as interesting, a theory needs to balance novelty and continuity, i.e. being different but at the same time connecting to established knowledge that is already familiar to the audience (McKinley *et al.*, 1999).

Davis’ propositions have had a considerable influence on later writings and debates on interestingness in different fields of research, for example, Das and Long (2010) in management studies, Frank and Landström (2016) and Landström and Harirchi (2019) in entrepreneurship, Cachon (2012) in operation management, Smith (2003) and Voss (2003) in marketing, and Gray and Wegner (2013) in psychology as well as in a number of editorial articles such as Baba (2016), Bartunek *et al.* (2006), Salvato and Aldrich (2012) and Shugan (2003). These studies have shown contradictory results when it comes to the importance of counterintuitive arguments as a key aspect of interestingness. For example, Davis’ argumentation is supported when it comes to significant theoretical contributions in organizational studies (Corley and Gioia, 2011), and in management studies in general (Daft *et al.*, 1987). However, other studies suggest that interestingness is a much broader concept (e.g. Das and Long, 2010; Landström and Harirchi, 2019), where scholars in different fields perceive many different aspects of a study as interesting, for example, the practical relevance, the quality of scientific craftsmanship, the writing skills, etc.

Davis’ counterintuitive argument of interestingness has also been widely criticized. For example, Tsang (2021) is highly concerned with the influence Davis’ article has gained in management studies, arguing that too great a focus on producing counterintuitive and novel findings leads to inappropriate ways of conducting research. In particular, one-sided encouragement of studies based on Davis (1971) that challenges accepted truths and taken-for-granted beliefs disregards “boring” but important studies that can adequately explain a phenomenon or solve a problem. Moreover, such encouragement can incite the practice of HARKing, while inhibiting replication studies. As a consequence, the focus may undermine doctoral programs and decrease the impact of research by forcing doctoral students and other researchers to conduct challenging and counterintuitive studies that will satisfy journal reviewers and editors, but that might be unrelated to progress within the scientific field as well as for society and business practice (Tsang, 2021).

We will elaborate on the critiques provided by Tsang (2021) and the rather narrow perspective on interestingness represented by Davis (1971). In the following we will argue that interestingness as a concept needs to be broadened (Subsection 2.2.2) and contextualized (Subsection 2.2.3).

2.2.2 Interestingness – something more than counterintuitive and novel studies. Interestingness is an important element in empirical academic works, and in many empirical studies interestingness has been shown to be something more than merely linked to counterintuitive and novel results. For example, Bartunek *et al.* (2006) addressed interestingness in empirical works in management studies. Similar to Davis (1971), they found that research that challenges current assumptions is usually regarded as interesting, but in addition, studies need to show a high methodological quality to be considered interesting, i.e. well-crafted and well written, but also contributing to practical knowledge.

Das and Long (2010) partly support Davis’ (1971) and Bartunek *et al.*’s (2006) argument and emphasize the importance of creating counterintuitive ideas that challenge our assumptions, novelty in methods and applications, and practical relevance. However, in addition to what was emphasized in Bartunek *et al.* (2006), Das and Long (2010) argue that findings that make intuitive sense and studies that provide an understanding of the subjective nature of reality are often perceived as interesting by management researchers. A key finding by Das and Long (2010) is that scholarly perceptions of interestingness are multidimensional and complex. In this respect, they conclude that researchers are likely to

assign differing degrees of importance to various interestingness attributes depending on their disciplinary background, i.e. researchers in different fields tend to prioritize different attributes that make research interesting (see also [Salvato and Aldrich, 2012](#); [Landström and Harirchi, 2019](#)). Thus, these studies have all shown that Davis' counterintuitive-argument tends to be of importance in the perception of interestingness, but it is not the only thing that matters – interestingness has a much broader meaning for scholars.

2.2.3 Contextualizing interestingness. Research projects and a research profile driven by the researcher's own individual interest and passion is embedded in the idea that researchers have the possibility to freely choose their research topics and methods. However, a research profile is not built in a vacuum, but influenced by a broader academic context, for example, governed by the professional norms prevailing in the field, issues prioritized by research funding bodies, the possibilities of publication in high ranked journals and by the interest that prevails at the department and research center to which the researcher is affiliated ([Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013](#)). In addition, research fields such as EE are also driven by a strong practice-oriented research agenda ([Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020](#)) that will influence researchers to connect their research profile to teaching practice and learning outcomes ([Pittaway and Cope, 2007](#); [Kassean et al., 2015](#)).

Thus, interestingness is not only a matter of idiosyncratic opinions. There are some collectively held beliefs about what is perceived as interesting within a research field, for example, “hot” topics, theories and methods become interesting among scholars within a specific field of research or in a specific location and geographical area (e.g. between European and US EE research). When studying interestingness, there is a need to take into consideration contextual aspects, in this study, the characteristics of EE as a research field.

2.3 Perception of interestingness in EE – outlining research questions

Davis' seminal work in the 1970s put forward counterintuitivity and novelty as the key aspects that make a study interesting. We recognize that these aspects are important, but in line with arguments put forward by scholars like [Bartunek et al. \(2006\)](#), and [Das and Long \(2010\)](#) we call for a broader view of interestingness as a concept. This means including elements such as practical relevance and usefulness, scientific craftsmanship and methodological rigor as important aspects of interestingness. In line with the argument put forward by [Landström and Harirchi \(2019\)](#) that the perception of interestingness is to some extent unique for a specific research field, we will also explore to what extent the perceptions of interestingness in the EE field are advanced by key scholars or what scholars consider to be hot topics. In order to elaborate on this assumptions we formulate the first research question (RQ1) in the following way:

RQ1. What is perceived as interesting (and uninteresting) in EE research?

A key finding from [Das and Long \(2010\)](#) is that perceptions of interestingness are multidimensional and complex. In line with a broader view of interestingness we argue that the perception of interestingness will differ among groups of EE researchers. We can assume that different scholars, but also external stakeholders, may vary in their perceptions of interestingness, which will affect the focus and characteristics of conversations going on within EE research. In this paper we explore the individual interest in relation to other researchers and stakeholders in the field, where similar interests becomes essential focal points for scholarly conversations in the field. Thus, we propose as our second research question:

RQ2. How does the perception of interestingness differ between subgroups of researchers within EE research?

Researchers' perception of interestingness will not only influence their own research profile, and how different groups of researchers within the field are linked together in a social structure, but will also influence which conversations researchers within the field will end up in. According to Huff (1999), researchers need to identify subgroups of scholars within the field who perceive interestingness in a similar way and are attracted by the same research issues in order to initiate conversations and build collaborative networks. In a young and emergent research field we expect individual researchers to be particularly influential drivers of conversations in EE research. The argumentation leads to our third research question:

RQ3. How can researchers identify and engage in scholarly conversation centered on common interests in EE research?

3. Method

3.1 Identification of respondents

Our interest in perceptions of interestingness required us to collect first-hand data from EE researchers. Potential respondents were identified by reviewing a large number of conference papers, book chapters and journal articles. For conference papers, we selected 10 major conferences with a tradition of including papers on EE. The selected conferences and their coverage (years) were: AOM Annual Meeting (2014–2018), EURAM Annual Meeting (2014–2018), Babson Conference (2014–2018), the RENT Conference (2013–2018), ESU (2014–2018), EERC (2019), USASBE (2014–2019), ACERE (2014–2019) and 3E (2014–2019). Manuscripts addressing issues related to EE in the title or abstract were identified and the authors included in our sample. For book chapters, we selected 10 edited books that address EE. The following volumes were included in the search process: Faghih and Zali (2018), Fayolle (2006, 2007a, b, 2010, 2018), Manimala and Thomas (2017), Morris (2014), Morris and Liguori (2016), Matthews and Liguori (2018), Page West *et al.* (2009) and Thomas and Kelly (2008). In addition, we identified authors of published articles on EE in peer-reviewed academic journals in the period 2000–2018. The list of authors was identified via the literature review conducted by Hägg and Gabrielsson (2020).

The sources described above were used to compile a final database with author names, affiliations and e-mail addresses of all identified EE researchers. In many cases the e-mail addresses were available in the paper/chapter/article. If not, we expanded our search via the Google Web Search engine. Duplicates were deleted and we checked for other inconsistencies such as spelling. We managed to identify 1,409 unique EE researchers.

3.2 Questionnaire development

Both open-ended and closed-ended questions were included in the survey. The reasoning behind this was, on the one hand to gain general insight to the question of interestingness based on concepts used in similar studies within other fields, and on the other hand to gain a deeper and richer insight into the specific artifacts of interestingness within entrepreneurial education. As a result, a fairly detailed questionnaire comprising almost 50 questions, both open-ended and closed-ended, to assess the respondents' perceptions of interestingness. In addition, the respondents were asked to provide information about characteristics such as age, gender, geographic affiliation, disciplinary background, seniority of position and time allocated to research and teaching.

Two approaches were employed to analyze scholars' perceptions of interestingness in EE studies. The first is an inductive approach that takes into account that scholars tend to assign different meanings to interestingness due to individual preferences and idiosyncratic opinions (see Subsection 2.2). Consequently, we used open-ended measures where respondents could freely elaborate on their perceptions of interestingness, based on

Landström and Harirchi (2019). We asked the following questions; (1) What do you regard as “interesting” in EE studies?, (2) What do you regard as “uninteresting” in EE studies? and (3) Can you please nominate the most interesting work (book, article etc.) related to EE studies? This inductive approach compares well with previous studies on interestingness in scientific fields (e.g. Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Salvato and Aldrich, 2012).

The second is a deductive approach anchored in Das and Long (2010) who developed measures to gauge different (more generic) attributes of interestingness based on the theory of interestingness in sciences (see also Landström and Harirchi, 2019). In this way, we obtain measures of interestingness attributes that can be used across different fields of research. In this approach, the respondents were asked to rate 23 different attributes to assess their importance in making a study on EE interesting, ranging from 1 = unimportant to 4 = extremely important. An exploratory factor analysis of the attributes was conducted to identify the underlying structure of the interestingness attributes in our dataset. The factor analysis is presented in Subsection 4.4 “Attributes that make EE research interesting”. All attributes including means and standard deviations are presented in Appendix.

Overall, combining inductive and deductive approaches provided opportunities to make rich and insightful analyses of the perceptions of interestingness in the EE field. At the same time, the mixed approach enabled us to explore and analyze the data thoroughly by using complementary insights from the open open-ended and closed-ended questions for each cluster in Section 5.

3.3 Data collection

A web link to the questionnaire was e-mailed in April 2019 to all 1,409 EE researchers identified in the previous step. Of these, 67 e-mails were returned as undelivered and those researchers were removed, resulting in 1,342 researchers receiving the questionnaire. The first question concerned whether the respondents identified themselves as EE researchers (either today and/or in the past). If they did not perceive themselves as EE researchers, they were directed to the end of the survey and excluded from the study. The remaining respondents were led through the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire the respondents were also provided with the opportunity to propose additional respondents who they identified as EE researchers. This snowball sampling resulted in 51 additional respondents who were not included in the first mailing. After a six-wave mailing, i.e. five reminders, 555 valid completed questionnaires were obtained from respondents identifying themselves as EE researchers, as illustrated in Table 1. Thereafter we excluded respondents who failed to provide information on the key variables of interestingness relevant for this study. In total, 465 respondents provided complete data for the selected variables used in our analyses.

3.4 Analyses

We performed non-respondent analyses to test for possible biases concerning respondents and non-respondents with respect to gender and geographic affiliation. Our analysis showed

Initial sample	1,409
Undelivered	67
No of researchers who received first invitation to survey	1,342
Snowball sampling	51
Total no of researchers who received invitation to survey	1,393
Questionnaire returns	555
Return rate	39.8%
Complete responses on key variables	465
Effective response rate	33.4%

Table 1.
Respondents and
response rate

no significant differences with respect to gender. However, the analyses revealed an overrepresentation of European researchers and an underrepresentation of North American researchers among the respondents compared to the total population of researchers who received the survey, significant at $p < 0.00$. This implies a potential limitation in our dataset in terms of geographical representation.

In addition, we compared early and late responders with respect to academic position, age, educational background, gender and geographic affiliation, assuming that the late responders would have strong similarities to non-responders (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). Furthermore, we compared the 465 responses with full information on the key variables of interestingness with those that were not useable due to incomplete data. These comparisons did not show any significant differences apart from an overrepresentation of male respondents in the sample used for the analyses, significant at $p < 0.05$.

We conducted analyses of both the open-ended and the closed questions about interestingness. The open-ended questions were analyzed by inductively categorizing the raw data into meaningful units without any *a priori* theory-based expectations. The coding was made independently by two of the authors. The inter-rater reliabilities showed a high degree of agreement between the coding (Cohen's kappa [3] between 0.939 and 0.973). The closed questions were subject to factor and cluster analyses. The statistical analyses associated with the closed questions are presented in more detail in Subsection 4.4 and Section 5.

Several steps were taken to minimize common method bias as the variables come from self-reported data, including the protection of respondent anonymity and ensuring that items were placed in different sections of the questionnaire to reduce the likelihood that responses were cross-checked for internal consistency. In addition, Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was conducted to check whether one component accounted for most of the variance. No evidence of common method bias was detected.

3.5 Description of the sample

A descriptive overview of the 465 respondents is presented in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, a majority of the respondents are male (58.3%), which corresponds well with the gender distribution seen in other samples of entrepreneurship scholars (e.g. Landström and Harirchi, 2019). The respondents come from different geographical contexts, of which Europe and North America are dominant; 63.4% have their main affiliation in Europe and 24.3% in North America. Most of the respondents (80.2%) hold a PhD degree. The average age of the respondents is quite high (50.1 years), which is reflected in the large proportion of senior scholars in terms of full professors and associate professors (54.0% of the total sample). While a large majority of the respondents (68.6%) have their educational background in "Business administration and law", a large proportion (31.4%) of respondents have other disciplinary backgrounds such as "Education", "Social and behavioral sciences", "Engineering, manufacturing and construction" and "Arts and humanities". In this respect, the sample represents a diverse group of scholars in terms of disciplinary backgrounds, which is also reflected in the considerable proportion of respondents (43.4%) who are partly (rather than fully) active in conducting EE studies. Hence, it seems that many scholars conducting EE studies also allocate substantial time and effort to research activities within other areas or domains.

4. Results

The perception of interestingness among scholars in a research field will influence the way the conversations become organized and the kind of conversations going on in the field.

Variable	Description
Gender	58.3% male
Age	50.1 years (average)
PhD degree	80.6%
Years working in academia	18.2 years (average)
Fully active in EE-studies	56.6%
Geographical affiliation	Europe (63.4%) North America (24.3%) Asia (3.9%) Australia and Oceania (3.7%) Middle East (2.2%) Latin America (1.7%) Africa (0.9%)
Disciplinary background	Business administration and law (68.6%) Education (9.3%) Social and behavioral sciences, journalism and information (8.6%) Engineering, manufacturing and construction (5.2%) Arts and humanities (4.9%) Other disciplines–natural sciences, ICT, health and welfare (3.4%)
Academic positions	Full professor (31.4%) Associate professor (22.6%) Assistant professor (18.3%) Senior lecturer/reader (9.0%) PhD candidates (9.0%) Other positions (6.0%) Post-doc (1.8%) Research assistant (1.8%)
Sample size	465 respondents

Table 2.
Description of the
respondents in the
sample

In this section we will start to elaborate on the perception of interestingness among EE scholars, and we will answer our first research question: What is perceived as interesting (and uninteresting) in EE research? To answer the question we will present analysis of the open-ended questions in the survey in [Subsections 4.1–4.3](#), and the responses to the closed questions in [Subsection 4.4](#).

4.1 Perception of interestingness among EE researchers

[Table 3](#) shows the top responses to the question: What do you regard as “interesting” in EE studies? The respondents could freely elaborate on what they perceive as interesting and nominate more than one aspect. In total, 938 aspects of interestingness were nominated. The nominations were reviewed and inductively coded into six distinct categories.

The top category includes nominations with respect to “Interesting topic-driven issues” and represents 73.2% of the total number of nominations. As can be seen from [Table 3](#), the top-three nominations in this category reflect topic issues directly related to EE (39.2%). The first top research topic includes nominations that indicate an interest in “teaching and learning entrepreneurship” (16.1%) with a focus on subtopics such as teaching methods and pedagogical approaches, program and curricula design, and learning processes in EE. The second top research topic includes nominations that reveal an interest in the various “Entrepreneurial characteristics” (12.4%) that are in focus when discussing EE, such as intentions, traits, cognition, passion, identity, mindsets or other personal characteristics necessary or essential for performing entrepreneurship. The third top research topic includes nominations that demonstrate an interest in the “Outcomes of EE” (10.7%), such as

	Number	Percent
<i>Topic-driven issues (73.2%)</i>		
Teaching and learning in entrepreneurship	151	16.1
Entrepreneurial characteristics (e.g. intentions, traits, cognition, passion, mind-set)	116	12.4
Outcomes of EE	100	10.7
<i>Methodological issues (11.1%)</i>		
Definitional and paradigmatic discussions	47	5.0
General methodological issues	25	2.7
Critical studies	16	1.7
Qualitative-oriented studies	10	1.1
Quantitative-oriented studies	6	0.6
<i>Practice links in EE (5.1%)</i>		
Link with practice in EE	24	2.6
Practical tools and methods	9	1.0
Best practice in EE	8	0.9
Combining theory and practice	6	0.6
<i>Theoretical considerations (4.3%)</i>		
Theory development/theory-driven studies	14	1.5
Knowledge accumulation/integration	9	1.0
Specific theories/frameworks	8	0.9
Multi/interdisciplinary approaches	8	0.9
<i>Research results (2.3%)</i>		
Practical value and applicability	19	2.0
Novelty of results/findings	3	0.3
<i>Other issues (4.2%)</i>		
Most/everything is interesting	3	0.3
Not coded (due to difficulties understanding the answer)	37	3.9
<i>Total</i>	938	100.0
Note(s): Interrater reliability: 97.3		

Table 3.
Interestingness in EE
studies

post-graduation activities of alumni, the impact and effectiveness of EE, the employability of graduates as well as alumni engagement. The remaining topic-driven issues (34%) comprised two general subcategories. The first contains issues embedded in EE, such as student engagement and student teams, the teachers' role, and the varying contexts of EE, while the second consists of different subthemes of practical EE, such as creativity and innovation, management, entrepreneurial universities and ecosystems, and specific forms of entrepreneurship (e.g. intrapreneurship, social entrepreneurship, academic entrepreneurship).

The second most frequently nominated category represents an interest in "Methodological issues" (11.1%). In this category, the top issue reflects interest in "Definitional and paradigmatic discussions of EE" (5.0%), which includes debates about the teaching domain such as why provide EE and for whom is it intended?, what are the disciplinary boundaries of the field? and other discussions about EE as a scholarly field. The second highest top issue within this category reflects an interest in "General methodological issues" (2.7%) such as methodological rigor and issues related to novel research questions and methods. A third top nomination is "Critical studies" (1.7%) where nominations reflect an interest in studies that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions in EE research.

Of the remaining categories we received nominations expressing an interest in "Practice links to EE" (5.1% of the total number of nominations), "Theoretical considerations" (4.3%), "Research results" (2.3%) and "Other issues" (4.2%). The category "Other issues" also

includes nominations that we were unable to code due to difficulties in understanding the respondents' answers (3.9%).

4.2 Perception of uninterestingness among EE researchers

In the next step we analyzed the responses to the question: What do you regard as “uninteresting” in EE studies? In total, 538 aspects of uninterestingness were nominated. The nominations were reviewed and inductively coded into five categories. Yet again, it is clear from Table 4 that particular research topics within the field are perceived as uninteresting by EE researchers. The top category of uninterestingness includes nominations that address “Uninteresting topic-driven issues” (29.4%). Of the specific topics that EE researchers perceive as uninteresting, the most frequently mentioned were “Entrepreneurial characteristics” (15.2%), “Business planning and business canvas models” (5.7%) and “Economics/management/finance” (4.7%).

The second most frequent category of uninterestingness addressed “Concerns regarding research approaches/methodologies” (25.7%). The two most common concerns raised in

	Number	Percent
<i>Uninteresting topic-driven issues (29.4%)</i>		
Entrepreneurial characteristics (e.g. intentions, traits, passion, cognition, mind-set)	82	15.2
Business planning and Canvas models	28	5.2
Economics/management/finance	25	4.7
Other topics (e.g. gender/entrepreneurial orientation)	23	4.3
<i>Concerns regarding research approaches/methodologies (25.7%)</i>		
Uninteresting RQ (e.g. incremental studies, reinventing the wheel, lack of novelty, descriptive studies)	41	7.6
Uninteresting methodologies – general (e.g. methodological flaws, lack of rigor)	36	6.7
Lack of relevance (e.g. studies without practical implications)	17	3.2
Uninteresting methodologies – qualitative studies (e.g. case, small scale studies)	17	3.2
Definitional and paradigmatic discussions (e.g. can entrepreneurship be taught? What is an opportunity?)	14	2.6
Uninteresting methodologies – quantitative studies (e.g. sophisticated statistical analysis, large samples)	13	2.4
<i>Uninteresting EE-studies (17.9%)</i>		
Too strong business focus/narrow studies/business school approach	32	5.9
Normative focus (e.g. best practice, “how-to” issues, technical aspects of starting a business, becoming an entrepreneur)	19	3.5
Impact and assessment studies of entrepreneurship education and teaching approaches	18	3.3
Theoretical studies, knowledge, developments and elaborations	14	2.6
Not considering the diversity of entrepreneurship and context (e.g. one size fits all, lacking contextual considerations)	9	1.7
Policy studies and initiatives on EE	5	0.9
<i>Concerns regarding EE teaching and academic work in general (14.3%)</i>		
Concerns regarding the way entrepreneurship is taught	59	11.0
Uninteresting academic work (e.g. teaching, grading, meetings, administration)	18	3.3
<i>Other issues (12.7%)</i>		
Nothing uninteresting in EE research	51	9.5
Not coded (due to difficulties understanding the answer)	17	3.2
<i>Total</i>	538	100.0
Note(s): Interrater reliability: 94.4		

Table 4.
Uninterestingness in
EE studies

these nominations were studies that lack novelty and have methodological flaws. In this respect, EE researchers seem to have some concerns regarding the low level of quality studies within the field, but also an aversion to studies that cannot show novelty and challenging results.

Of the remaining nominations a relatively large share belongs to the category “Uninteresting EE studies” (17.9%). This category includes concerns about studies having a too strong business or normative focus, as well as studies focusing on the impact and assessment of EE. Another category regarded as uninteresting addresses “Concerns regarding EE teaching and administration” (14.3%), which includes dissatisfaction about the way entrepreneurship is taught and descriptions of academic work (e.g. teaching, grading, meetings, administration, etc.). Finally, the nominations also include a notable share (9.5%) explicitly stating that there is nothing uninteresting in EE research.

Comparing perceptions of interestingness vs uninterestingness suggests that EE is a highly topic-driven field. Many scholars have opinions on which topics are worth researching or not researching in EE. In Tables 3 and 4 it is shown that “topic-driven” issues is the largest category for the perception of interestingness (73.2%) as well as for the perception of uninterestingness (29.4%). It should also be noted that in many cases the responses are highly contradictory, for example, responses related to “Entrepreneurial characteristics” constitute both the second largest number of responses on the most interesting issues in EE and on the issue that is perceived as the most uninteresting. Similar contradictions were found with regard to other issues, such as definitional and paradigmatic discussions, theory development and theory-driven studies, and the respondents’ perceptions of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The results suggest that EE is a highly heterogeneous scholarly field – comprising different groups of scholars with contradictory perceptions of what is interesting in EE research.

4.3 Interesting works in EE research

When looking into the actual nominations of works, the most interesting finding is the absence of core works that unite EE researchers (Table 5). In total, 358 nominations were made, and the top-10 works only account for 83 of these nominations (or 23.2%). In addition,

Rank	Work	Number	Percent
1	Sarasvathy (2001)	13	4.3
2	Neck and Greene (2011)	10	3.3
3	Neck <i>et al.</i> (2014)	8	2.6
4	Berglund and Verduin (2018)	7	2.3
	Nabi <i>et al.</i> (2017)	7	2.3
6	Fayolle (2013)	5	1.6
7	Fayolle and Gailly (2008)	4	1.3
	Fayolle (2007a, b)	4	1.3
	Pittaway and Cope (2007)	4	1.3
10	Thrane <i>et al.</i> (2016)	3	1.0
	Fayolle and Gailly (2015)	3	1.0
	Morris <i>et al.</i> (2013)	3	1.0
	Sarasvathy and Venkataraman (2011)	3	1.0
	Politis (2005)	3	1.0
	Kuratko (2005)	3	1.0
	Béchar and Grégoire (2005)	3	1.0
Total number of nominations: 358			
Total:		83	27.3

Table 5.
Interesting works

as many as 220 different unique works were mentioned as being the most interesting works in the field. Even though the names of the authors of the most interesting works are not surprising, the proportion of the high-ranking works perceived as interesting is surprisingly low, the most interesting work (Sarasvathy, 2001) only generating 4.3% of the total number of nominations.

Inspired by the categorization of EE research developed by *Loi et al. (2016)* we decided to analyze the diverse characteristics of interesting works in EE in more depth (Table 6). Less than half of the nominations (48.5%) are related to works on EE and more than 30% to entrepreneurship in general. Only a handful of nominations are solely connected to the pedagogy field. This means that the EE field in general is less connected to the pedagogy field and far more strongly linked to the entrepreneurship field.

One of the most intriguing findings from this analysis is the lack of nominations of works related to entrepreneurial intentions, i.e. individuals' orientation which might lead to venture creation. Previous studies (see, e.g. *Nabi et al., 2017*) have shown that studies of entrepreneurial intentions are one of the key areas in EE research when it comes to published works. Our study demonstrates that research on intentions is not considered particularly interesting by EE researchers. It is also worth noting that the literature on entrepreneurial learning in the general entrepreneurship domain is only considered most interesting by a small number of EE researchers. This is surprising in light of the strong influence of entrepreneurship researchers in the EE field. Another interesting finding is that only 6.2% of the nominated works are "tool" oriented (e.g. related to lean start up, business model, canvas, design thinking, etc.), despite the fact that these tools are present in almost every EE program around the world. Finally, we would like to underline the fact that 189 of the respondents did not nominate any interesting work. This strengthens the impression of a field where the researchers have only created a common ground or platform to a very limited extent.

4.4 Attributes that make EE research interesting

To enable systematic analyses of interestingness we asked the respondents to rate 23 attributes on their importance in making a study on EE interesting. The attributes were taken from *Das and Long (2010)*; see also *Landström and Harirchi, 2019*). On aggregate, our data suggest that EE researchers tend to highly rate attributes related to practical relevance and novelty, while perceiving studies that rely on sophisticated statistical analysis and large samples as less interesting. The three most highly rated attributes are related to practical applications with regard to a theory or research findings (e.g. attribute 12), the investigation

	Number	Percent
<i>Entrepreneurial education (EE)</i>	148	48.5
Introspection ("state of the art"/conceptual work on EE)	50	16.4
Entrepreneurial intentions	9	3.0
Pedagogical approaches	48	15.7
Evaluation/outcome of EE, EE initiatives (at universities)	41	13.4
<i>General entrepreneurship</i>	94	30.8
<i>Tools/popular science</i>	19	6.2
<i>Other issues</i>	44	14.4
Works outside EE and general entrepreneurship	25	8.2
Not possible to categorize	19	6.2
Total	305	100.0

Note(s): Interrater reliability: 93.9

Table 6.
Interesting works in
EE studies

of novel issues (e.g. attribute 16) and the practical relevance of the topic (e.g. attribute 18). The lowest ratings were for attributes related to instructive details about data analytical tools (e.g. attribute 2), application of sophisticated data analytical tools (e.g. attribute 9) as well as the use of large samples (e.g. attribute 3). We present means and standard deviations for all attributes in [Appendix](#).

However, the attributes that make a study interesting are complex and multidimensional ([Das and Long, 2010](#)). For this reason, we employed exploratory factor analysis to uncover the underlying structure of the interestingness attributes. We used principal components as the extraction model combined with orthogonal rotation to find interpretable solutions, where the number of retained factors relies on Eigenvalues greater than 1 ([Kaiser, 1960](#)). The results are presented in [Table 7](#).

The factor analysis reveals four factors with underlying relationships between attributes. The first factor, “Novelty” (items no. 6, 7, 11 and 16), focuses on attributes associated with new paradigms or perspectives, new research designs and methodologies, and new questions or topics, thus indicating that interesting EE research has the quality of being original or even unusual in character (e.g. [Barley, 2006](#)). The second factor, “Theory” (items no. 1, 8, 13, 15 and 21), contains attributes that emphasize theory development and the application of and contribution to existing theory, as well as acknowledging existing theories and uncovering hidden assumptions. This factor indicates an interest in advancing EE research by using and developing robust theoretical frameworks.

The third factor, “Relevance” (items no. 12, 17, 18 and 22), includes attributes associated with practical applications, relevance to practitioners, the use of an engaging writing style, as well as an emphasis on intuitive and common-sense findings. This factor reflects the practice-oriented focus often found in EE research. Finally, the fourth factor is “Rigor” (items no. 3, 19 and 20), which focuses on logical and rational methodological approaches, and the use of large samples to generate findings that can be generalized to larger populations. This factor captures an underlying interest in the application of sophisticated methods and statistical techniques as a starting point for advancing EE research.

Item	Attributes ^a	Novelty	Theory	Relevance	Rigor
6	Different paradigm/different perspective	0.59	0.01	0.18	-0.08
7	New insights into research designs	0.69	0.14	0.03	0.11
11	Novel/exemplary research methodology	0.60	0.06	0.13	0.16
16	Totally new questions/novel topics	0.44	0.20	0.32	0.03
1	Contributes incrementally/develops existing theories	-0.10	0.57	-0.04	0.04
8	Focuses on theory development	0.31	0.51	-0.08	0.00
13	Unveils embedded assumptions	0.23	0.40	0.02	-0.04
15	Reviews/revisits previous theories	0.09	0.60	0.13	0.13
21	Applies existing theoretical frameworks	0.10	0.43	0.26	0.23
12	Emphasizes practical applications	0.08	0.07	0.47	0.20
17	Writing style blends storytelling with theory develop	0.21	-0.02	0.45	-0.01
18	Findings are relevant to day-to-day life	0.02	-0.05	0.66	0.05
22	Intuitive and common-sense findings	0.07	0.13	0.40	0.10
3	Uses large (rather than small) samples	0.06	0.02	-0.05	0.61
19	Methodology employed is rational, logical, objective	0.02	0.08	0.18	0.50
20	Findings generalizable to large populations	0.02	0.05	0.15	0.63
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1.933	1.626	1.543	1.449
	<i>Proportion</i>	0.292	0.246	0.233	0.219
	<i>Cronbach's α</i>	0.74	0.66	0.59	0.63

Table 7.
Factor analysis –
attributes of
interesting research

Note(s): ^aScores greater than 0.4 are considered stable

In this section we have elaborated on the perception of interestingness among EE scholars. We have taken an inductive approach to analyze interesting (and uninteresting) issues and works, as well as a deductive approach to identify more generic attributes of interestingness in EE research. These insights form the basis for the following two sections. First, we discuss how perceptions of interestingness in EE research differ between subgroups of EE researchers (Section 5), and, second, we elaborate on how the different perceptions will affect the focus and characteristics of conversations going on within the research field (Section 6).

5. Different perceptions of interestingness among EE researchers

A core tenet in our study is that researchers' perception of interestingness creates possibilities to develop collaborative ties with researchers who share similar interests, which influence the way conversations within the field are organized and structured. To start analyzing how perceptions of interestingness in EE research differ between subgroups of EE researchers (RQ2), we employ hierarchical clustering using Ward's method on the factor scores identified in the factor analysis, based on Das and Long's (2010) closed and more generic attributes of interestingness (see Subsection 4.4). The cluster analysis identifies five subgroups of EE researchers based on their differing perceptions of interestingness. We complemented the analysis with a description of what each of the subgroups perceive as interesting (and uninteresting) in EE research based on the open-ended measures where respondents could freely elaborate on their perceptions. The different perceptions among the five subgroups are presented in Table 8.

A careful examination of perceptions of interestingness within and across the five identified subgroups suggests the following. First, we find a medium-sized subgroup ($n = 60$), cluster 1, whose perceptions of interestingness resemble the pragmatist philosophical thoughts that have had a strong influence on contemporary EE pedagogy (Kyrö, 2015; Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020). This particular pedagogical stance emphasizes the learning of entrepreneurship as inseparable from practitioner activity (e.g. Gibb and Ritchie, 1982) and there is strong orientation toward experiential and practice based methodologies to inform educational practice (e.g. Neck *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, researchers in this subgroup are attracted by practically relevant EE research that advances theory by bringing forth new ideas and perspectives. On the other hand, they exhibit much less interest in objective and rational methods using large samples. In the open-ended questions the sub-groups nominate a broad range of topics and issues as interesting, but in particular they show interest in teaching and learning that foster entrepreneurial characteristics (i.e. competencies, mindsets) and they have a stronger context-sensitive interest. Moreover, researchers in the subgroup seem rather "picky" as there are many issues that are perceived as uninteresting, not least when it comes to (in their view) narrow EE studies with an overly strong business orientation. They also show a strong EE focus in their nominations of interesting works, with a particular emphasis on introspection studies that review and discuss state-of-the-art in EE research, but they also nominate a high number of general works from the entrepreneurship field. In line with their distinctive profile, we label this cluster "Action-oriented advocates".

The second subgroup, cluster 2, is also medium-sized ($n = 57$). The aggregated interestingness profile of its members suggests that many are influenced by critical and interpretive approaches that emphasize that EE need to step-back and examine contemporary thinking and established paradigms by asking thought-provoking questions (e.g. Berglund and Verduijn, 2018). Accordingly, members of this subgroup highlight new ideas and perspectives that advance theory as the most important attribute of interesting EE research. On the other hand, they show less interest in practically relevant research that uses objective and rational methods. Furthermore, their responses to the

Table 8.
Cluster analysis on
interestingness
attributes

Cluster	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5
Cluster name	Action-oriented advocates	Critical advocators	Practice-oriented builders	General incrementalists	Spectators
Cluster size	60	57	167	61	120
Factor 1: Novelty	0.44	0.27	0.34	-0.64	-0.49
Factor 2: Theory	0.39	0.23	0.04	0.16	-0.44
Factor 3: Relevance	0.52	-0.59	0.21	-0.08	-0.24
Factor 4: Rigor	-0.41	-0.40	0.54	0.21	-0.46
Generic perceptions of interestingness attributes in EE research	Practically relevant EE research that generate novel theoretical insights.	Novel ideas and perspectives that contribute to advancing EE theory	Methodologically robust research that contribute with novel ideas and perspectives on EE with practical relevance	Methodologically robust research that contribute to advancing EE theory	Lower than other clusters on all factors, implying a limited and/or narrow interest in EE research
Open ended perceptions of interestingness in EE research	<p>Many nominations of interestingness, but a large variation in the nominations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong theoretical focus and a search for novelty in the studies Context-sensitive research Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurial characteristics 	<p>Strong interestingness in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Methodological issues "Critical studies of EE" Theoretically driven research Studies that show novelty in the findings <p>Few specific topics are perceived as interesting, but the most interesting is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching and learning in EE 	<p>Generic perceptions of interestingness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few specific issues perceived as interesting. Exceptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching and learning in EE Specific theoretical frameworks Multi-/inter-disciplinary approaches Results of practical value 	<p>Few nominations of interestingness but the majority relate to topical issues, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurial characteristics Outcomes and impact of EE <p>Low general interest in links to practice</p>	<p>Some practical interest (e.g. studies linked to practice, and combining theory and practice), and with low theoretical focus</p>
Open ended perceptions of uninterestingness in EE research	<p>Many critical perceptions of EE studies, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economics/, finance/ management issues Too strong business focus, narrow studies, or business school approach 	<p>Many topics are perceived as uninteresting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurial characteristics Impact and assessment studies Studies that lack interesting RQ, lack theory, and show flaws in methodology are also perceived as uninteresting 	<p>Few issues are perceived as uninteresting in EE. Exceptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theoretical studies Studies that lack relevance Uninteresting RQ 	<p>Few issues are perceived as uninteresting, but a general disinterest in qualitative oriented methodologies – (e.g. case, small scale studies, etc.)</p>	<p>Uninterestingness is mainly focused on methodological issues, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> general methodological flaws definitional and paradigmatic discussions
Perceptions of interesting scholarly works	<p>A strong EE focus in nominations, e.g. introspection studies (state-of-the-art studies on EE), but also a large number of general ENT works</p>	<p>Many nominations of "interesting works". Strong EE focus in their nominations, e.g. pedagogical approaches</p>	<p>No particular pattern in "interesting works", although general ENT works has a large number of nominations</p>	<p>Strong focus on general ENT works</p>	<p>Few nominations of "interesting works", and few on EE works, exception: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -introspection studies (state-of-the-art studies on EE) </p>

Note(s): The measures represented each cluster's mean value on each factor, with standardized factor scores (mean = 0)

open-ended questions revealed that the sub-group appreciate reflections on methodological issues including definitional and paradigmatic discussions, critical approaches, and studies with novel and counter-intuitive findings. They also perceive many topics and issues as uninteresting, in particular impact and assessment studies, studies that show methodological (definitional and/or paradigmatic) flaws and studies that lack theory. Furthermore, they provided many nominations of interesting EE works with a strong emphasis on pedagogical approaches for teaching and learning. As a result of their distinctive profile, we label this cluster “Critical advocates”.

The analysis also identified a rather eclectic group, cluster 3, which is a relatively large and broad subgroup of EE researchers ($n = 167$). On closer examination we find that it is the combination of methodological rigor together with practical relevance that differentiates this subgroup from the others. In this respect, their interestingness profile suggests that they are attracted by new and challenging findings that build on robust data, as well as generalizable findings that have high practical or policy relevance. In the open-ended questions the researchers in this subgroup suggested few specific topics and issues that make them stand out compared to other groups, with the exception of a stronger emphasis on specific theoretical frameworks (e.g. effectuation), a preference for multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches and a high appreciation of the practical value and applicability of research findings. There is, moreover, nothing that stands out when it comes to their appreciation of interesting works, although they nominated a large number of general entrepreneurship works. In line with their specific profile, we label this cluster “Practice-oriented builders”.

While the first three subgroups share a common interest in their appreciation of EE research that presents new questions or topics, there are two subgroups that depart from this general pattern; one subgroup (cluster 4) has a stronger research focus, and the other subgroup (cluster 5) has a more detached orientation that appears to indicate a low general interest in the EE field.

Cluster 4 is a medium-sized subgroup of EE researchers ($n = 61$) whose perceptions of interestingness suggest a “normal science” approach to EE research, where scholarly work is conducted within fixed frameworks and paradigms to accumulate knowledge that advances the field (Landström and Persson, 2010). In this respect, the members of the sub-group appreciate theory development and the use of rigorous and sophisticated methods. On the other hand, the members of the subgroup are far less attracted by new and challenging questions, and there is a fairly low interest in research of practical relevance. They submitted fewer nominations in the open-ended questions and there are few issues that distinguish this subgroup. However, topics and issues that were nominated frequently relate to the outcomes and impact of EE, while there is little interest in linking EE research to practice. Moreover, the subgroup members rate EE research connected to economics, general management and finance as particularly uninteresting, in addition to case research and small-scale studies using qualitative methodologies. When it comes to nominations of interesting works, there is a strong focus on general entrepreneurship research. As a result of their distinctive profile, we label the cluster “General incrementalists”.

Cluster 5 is a relatively large subgroup of EE researchers ($n = 120$). Overall, their profile suggests that there is nothing particular in EE research that arouses their interest. They showed lower scores for all four interestingness factors, which clearly sets them apart from the other subgroups. They also submitted the lowest number of nominations in the open-ended questions, where the data indicate some appreciation of EE research with links to practice or that combines theory and practice, while the appreciation of (only) theoretical studies appears low. When it comes to perceptions of uninterestingness, they have a general disinterest in methodological issues in EE research including definitional and paradigmatic discussions, and they also dislike methodological flaws. Furthermore, the members of the subgroup provided few nominations of interesting works, with no particular pattern except

for some interest in introspection studies that review and discuss state-of the art in EE research. Hence, while members of the subgroup contributed to EE research at some point and have some interest in following what is happening in the field from a practical point of view, it seems to be of low priority for them. In line with their distinctive profile, we label the cluster “Spectators”.

Overall, the analysis suggests a couple of things to consider when building an understanding of how the perception of interestingness differs between subgroups of researchers within EE research. First, an overarching narrative that unites a majority of EE researchers (61%) and brings the first three subgroups in the EE field together is a general interest in research that address newness in paradigms and perspectives. This suggests that parts of EE research are driven by perceptions of interestingness that are closely aligned with [Davis’ \(1971\)](#) counterintuitive argument. Second, the subgroups show connections at lower hierarchical levels that bring them more or less closely together in terms of their perceptions of interestingness, such as practical application (in cluster 1 and Practical-oriented builders in cluster 3), theory building (Critical advocates in cluster 2 and General incrementalists represented in cluster 4) and rigorous and replicable methods (Practice-oriented builders in cluster 3 and General incrementalists in cluster 4). Thus, empirically we find that perceptions of interestingness in EE research are complex and multidimensional (e.g. [Das and Long, 2010](#); [Landström and Harirchi, 2019](#)). Third, the EE field is populated by one subgroup of researchers (Spectators in cluster 5) that is clearly less interested in EE as a unique field and may perceive EE as a secondary research field. Consequently, while this subgroup constitutes a significant part of the field (about 25%), their interestingness profile also suggests that they do not contribute in any significant sense to driving core conversations in EE research.

To conclude, this section show how perceptions of interestingness in EE research differs between subgroups (clusters) of EE researchers. The subgroups represent differences in perspectives in regards what makes a study interesting in EE research, which open up opportunities to build social and collaborative networks and develop conversations centered on common interests. In the next section, we build on these findings to discuss how the different perceptions will affect the focus of conversations going on within the research field.

6. Conversations centered on common interests in EE research

As shown in [Section 5](#), interestingness plays a key role in channeling and coordinating scholarly efforts in young and growing research fields by enabling like-minded colleagues to collaborate as a community (e.g. [Mitchell and Dino, 2011](#); [Gartner, 2013](#)) – creating subgroups (clusters) of researchers within the field. This observation rests on the idea that research is not about “presenting facts” but engaging in conversations with audiences or subgroups of scholars who share similar research interests within the field but who focus on somewhat different research problems ([Huff, 1999](#)). Following this logic and in light of our analyses and empirical findings, in this section we will elaborate on the focus of the conversations going on in each of these subgroups of researchers, and answering our third research question: How can researchers identify and engage in scholarly conversations centered on a common interest in EE research?

The empirical analysis conveys the underlying structure of [Das and Long’s \(2010\)](#) generic interestingness attributes among EE researchers, with four interestingness factors that explicate variations in underlying preferences (see [Section 4.4](#)). Overall, these preferences represent classical positions in discussions and debates about scholarly norms that guide scientific production (e.g. [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013](#); [Bartunek and Rynes, 2014](#); [Frank and Landström, 2016](#)), such as: *novelty*–pushing for new and imaginative discoveries that challenge the status quo; *theory building*–the importance of integrating and accumulating

knowledge within a particular domain by building on the work of others; *methodological rigor*—producing work based on rigorous and sophisticated research methods; and *practical relevance*—producing work that is relevant to practice. However, our analysis also shows that conversations in the EE field do not fully reflect or correspond to these four underlying factors. Instead, the conversations are built on common interests manifested in a number of subgroups (see Section 5), where subgroups [4] with a particular interest in EE can be related to contemporary core conversations based on their unique mix of interestingness attributes. In Table 9 we have summarized the main features that characterize conversations centered on common interests in EE research.

Our analysis identifies a core conversation that we label PROGRESS, which is characterized by the ambition and interest in moving EE and associated research forward by identifying and developing specialized and unique features that distinguish the teaching and learning of entrepreneurship from other scholarly domains (e.g. Neck and Corbett, 2018). The conversation highlight EE as an inclusive concept that can be embedded within different

Conversation	PROGRESS		UTILIZATION	ACCUMULATION
	Differentiation	Reorientation		
Character of conversation	Improved and advanced conditions for EE research as a unique scholarly domain Developing practice-based methodologies and actionable theories	Moving away from stereotypical notions of entrepreneurship	Making practical and effective use of EE research	Gradual gathering of scientific knowledge that advance EE and entrepreneurship research
Conversation arenas*	EE and entrepreneurship journals and conferences (e.g. 3E, ESU, RENT, USASBE)		Entrepreneurship and management journals and conferences (e.g. AOM, Babson)	Entrepreneurship and management journals and conferences (e.g. AOM, EURAM, RENT)
Inspiration	Inspiration from EE and general entrepreneurship works	Inspiration from EE works	Inspiration from general entrepreneurship works	Inspiration from general entrepreneurship works
Audience(s)	Researchers in EE and ENT research and teaching	Research-oriented EE researchers	Broad range of audiences	Research-oriented entrepreneurship and management researchers
Characteristics of conversants	Southern Europe UK and Ireland Northern Europe Female researchers Senior (tenured) researchers and post docs High focus on EE studies	Northern Europe Female researchers Younger researchers (age) High degree of research activity	North America Industry relationships Less involved in ENT teaching	Northern Europe

Note(s): 3E = ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference
AOM = Academy of Management Annual Meeting
Babson = Babson conference
ESU = European University Network on Entrepreneurship Workshop
EURAM = European Academy of Management
RENT = Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Conference
USASBE = US Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship

Table 9.
Core conversations centered on common interests in EE research

curriculum contexts. The aim is to build the knowledge base on the teaching and learning of entrepreneurship so educators around the world can use the research as a guide for their own teaching development. The audience in this conversation consists of research-oriented researchers who are fully active in the EE field, and who regularly attend both EE conferences (e.g. 3E and ESU) and entrepreneurship conferences (e.g. RENT).

The PROGRESS conversation is driven jointly by the “Practice-oriented advocates” and “Critical advocates” subgroups who both share a general interest in identifying and developing specialized and unique features that distinguish EE from other fields, and they energize the conversation by focusing their dialogues on Differentiation and Reorientation respectively. The Differentiation dialogue incorporates in the conversation the approach of seeking to create more experiential and engaging learning environments for EE. Hence, the dialogue is embedded in a pragmatic approach that seek to bring greater coherence to educational activities by developing and improving links between education and practice (e.g. [Rasmussen and Sørheim, 2006](#); [Lackéus and Williams Middleton, 2015](#)). This topic of conversation attracts particular interest from researchers in Northern Europe, Southern Europe, the UK and Ireland. Moreover, there is an overrepresentation of senior (tenured) researchers, post docs and female researchers among the conversants.

The Reorientation dialogue has a more critical and reflective stance toward EE research. The intention is to liberate EE from stereotypical and taken-for-granted notions of entrepreneurship to co-create and develop desirable futures, thereby potentially changing the way people are taught as well as what they learn in EE. In this respect, the dialogue indicates a particular preference for developing new challenging questions and exploring novel paradigms that can advance or reorient the EE field (e.g. [Neergaard et al., 2020](#)). This topic of conversation attracts particular interest from researchers in Northern Europe. Among the conversants there is also an overrepresentation of female researchers and younger researchers.

Another core conversation identified in our analysis is characterized by a strong interest in making practical and effective use of new EE research, which we labeled UTILIZATION. The audience in this conversation is relatively broad and includes researchers who attend general management and entrepreneurship conferences (e.g. AOM, Babson). Driven by the subgroup “Practice-oriented builders” (cluster 3), this conversation articulates a strong preference for statistical methods that can verify new ideas and perspectives that are useful from a practical point of view (e.g. [Martin et al., 2013](#); [Rideout and Gray, 2013](#)). As such, the dialogue is very much centered on developing stable and consistent results within or across specified contexts. The conversation attracts particular interest from researchers in North America. Among the conversants there is also an overrepresentation of researchers with a higher degree of industry relationships.

Finally, our analysis identified a fourth core conversation, ACCUMULATION, which is characterized by a general interest in the gradual gathering and build up of scholarly knowledge on EE. The audience in this conversation consists of research-oriented entrepreneurship and management researchers who regularly attend general entrepreneurship and management conferences (e.g. RENT, AOM, EURAM). Driven by the subgroup labeled General incrementalists (cluster 4), the conversation articulates a particular preference for accumulating knowledge by using statistical methods to test and develop theories and findings. Much of the inspiration comes from general entrepreneurship works. The conversation attracts particular interest from researchers in Northern Europe.

To conclude, in this final section we have analyzed how researchers can engage in conversations centered on common interest. The findings acknowledge the diversity of perspectives in regards what makes a study interesting in EE research, but also show that similar perceptions of interestingness within the different subgroups of EE researchers affect the focus of conversations going on within the research field. These theoretical and empirical insights advance the understanding of how perception of interestingness influence the structure

and focus of conversations in EE research by acknowledging the diversity of perspectives in regards what makes a study interesting, while at the same time offering guidance for identifying and engaging in conversations centered on common interest in EE research.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Contributions

The aim of this study has been to advance the understanding of how perception of interestingness influence the structure and focus of conversations in EE research. Particularly, our analysis provide theoretical and empirical insights into what researchers in the field perceive as interesting (RQ1), how the perception of interestingness differs among subgroups of EE researchers (RQ2), and finally, based on the focus and characteristics of conversations going on within the subgroups, how EE researchers can engage in conversations centered on common interest (RQ3). In light of our analysis and findings, we will in this final section reflect on the development of EE as a research field, and how researchers can support the integrity and relevance of EE research by identifying conversants sharing common interests in the field.

EE is a young and less institutionalized field in the academic system (Neck and Corbett, 2018; Gabriëlsson *et al.*, 2020), and similar to other young research fields (e.g. Fink *et al.*, 2016) it is highly driven by subjective and idiosyncratic perceptions of interestingness. In line with such arguments, our results reveal that EE is a fragmented research field when it comes to the perception of interestingness, as well as the absence of core research works within the field. Our analysis shows that EE is a highly “topic-driven” research field, in which researchers perceive topics such as teaching and learning entrepreneurship, the characteristics of the entrepreneur and outcomes of EE as particularly interesting. Many EE researchers tend to have an interest in issues related to practical relevance and, not least, to novel and challenging ideas, at the expense of sophisticated statistical analysis and large sample studies. In this respect, the topic oriented interest, strong focus on novelty and challenging research, as well as the practical relevance of the research are similar to other young research fields (Salvato and Aldrich, 2012; Landström and Harirchi, 2019), which is understandable in research fields that need to compete for fundings, talent and recognition (Tsang, 2021). In this respect, our findings can serve as input for a discussion of how to continue building scholarly conversations and communication arenas within the field – on the one hand embedded in a passionate interest among the community of researchers, on the other acknowledging the value of building and disseminating knowledge based on systematic studies and replicable findings (e.g. Rideout and Gray, 2013; Neck and Corbett, 2018).

The analysis identified five subgroups (clusters) of EE researchers. Subgroups 1 and 2 can be seen as main advocates of the EE field. They are both very concerned with improving and advancing EE research as a unique scholarly domain. Subgroup 1 has a particular interest in practically relevant research that generate novel theoretical insights, and the members of subgroup 2 are interested in novel paradigmatic and theoretical contributions. Researchers in subgroup 3 place more emphasis on methodological rigor. Subgroups 4 and 5 differ from the other subgroups in that they are not particularly interested in novelty and challenging current assumptions. But, there are also major differences between the two subgroups, for example, subgroup 4 has a strong research orientation and an interest in studies that demonstrate solid scientific craftsmanship that focus on theory and rigor, whereas subgroup 5 consists of a large group of researchers who are not particularly involved in EE research (“Spectators”).

Finally, our analysis generates insights on how EE researchers can navigate the EE landscape and engage in conversations with audiences who share similar research interests. From our analysis it becomes obvious that the field of EE in general is largely characterized by a pioneering spirit, and many conversations focus on novelty and challenging current

knowledge. In [Section 6](#) this general statement is nuanced and it is shown that three core conversations are going on within the field. The PROGRESS conversation is driven by the main advocates of EE research (subgroups 1 and 2) and includes dialogues on “differentiation” and “reorganization”, the UTILIZATION conversation (driven by subgroup 3) centered around bridging the rigor-relevance gap, and finally, the ACCUMULATION conversation that attracts researchers with an interest in knowledge accumulation, identifying research gaps and theory building in EE research (mainly in subgroup 4).

Our findings encourage the integrity and relevance of EE scholarship by explicating the pluralism of EE research in regards what makes a study interesting. In this respect, researchers who seek and want to participate in conversations discussing new topics, approaches, methods, etc., appear to have great opportunities to find like-minded researchers within the field. However, there are also nuances in this statement. Researchers with an interest in practical applicable research should approach the dialogue on “differentiation” taking place at conferences such as 3E, ESU, RENT and USASBE, or engage in the UTILIZATION conversation (with a stronger entrepreneurship focus) at conferences such as AOM and Babson. Researchers interested in challenging the paradigmatic and theoretical assumptions in EE research will find their like-minded colleagues at the dialogue on “reorientation” going on at EE and entrepreneurship journals and conferences. Finally, researchers interested in relevance, methodological and theoretical issues should approach the dialogue on “differentiation”, but particularly, the core conversation on ACCUMULATION, with an interest in knowledge accumulation via theory development and quantitative research designs – conversations that are going on at more general management and entrepreneurship conferences, for example, RENT, AOM and EURAM. Concurrently, the different conversations contribute to making EE a vibrant scholarly field with multiple opportunities to build a research profile, create social ties and networks and carve out niches in the research domain.

7.2 Limitations and future research opportunities

Our study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, we are unable to assess the representativeness of our database due to the lack of information about the population of EE researchers around the world. We tried to resolve this problem by using a broad range of different sources to identify potential respondents, including conferences, edited handbooks and published articles, as well as several rounds of “snowball sampling” in the survey. Nevertheless, the question of representativeness remains unresolved, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Future studies would hence be useful for clarifying the extent to which our sample reflects the characteristics of the global population of EE researchers. Second, the database has an over-representation of European EE researchers compared with the full list of potential respondents identified in our broad search who received an invitation to participate in the survey. However, as respondents were promised full anonymity, we were unable to send extra reminders to non-responders from outside Europe to balance the sample. Accordingly, we note this as a potential limitation in our dataset and we encourage future replications of our study to remedy this bias.

Notes

1. We use the term entrepreneurial education in line with research (e.g. [Erkkilä, 2000](#); [Jones and Iredale, 2010](#); [Henry and Lewis, 2018](#); [Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020](#); [Gabrielsson et al., 2020](#)) that includes both the narrow view “entrepreneurship” education–focused on the specific context of venture creation, and the broader term “enterprising” education–focused on the development of attitudes, competences and enterprising behaviors including both business and non-business contexts.

2. Notable examples of scholarly communities within the broader domain of entrepreneurship studies that attract researchers with different identities and disciplinary backgrounds include entrepreneurial education (Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020), entrepreneurial finance (Landström, 2017), social entrepreneurship (Fayolle and Matlay, 2012), family businesses (DeMassis *et al.*, 2012) and critical entrepreneurship studies (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2003).
3. Cohen's kappa $k = (Pa - Pe) / (1 - Pe)$. Where, Pa = the proportion of observations in agreement, Pe = the proportion in agreement due to chance.
4. We excluded Spectators (cluster 5) in this step in the analysis, as their profile indicates that they lack a specific interest in EE research.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Item	Attribute	\bar{x}	σ
12	Emphasizes practical applications of a theory or research findings	3.35	0.74
16	Investigates totally new questions or novel topics	3.33	0.72
18	Findings are relevant to the day-to-day life of people	3.19	0.77
19	The methodology employed is rational, logical and objective	3.00	0.84
5	Offers insights into the subjective reality of the participants	2.99	0.80
6	Uses a totally different paradigm and offers a completely different perspective on the topic	2.97	0.84
7	Offers new insights into research designs	2.97	0.80
15	Reviews or revisits past theories or research findings to generate new insights or hypotheses	2.88	0.76
1	Contributes incrementally to existing theoretical frameworks by developing existing theories	2.83	0.80
4	Questions existing theory and offers "risky" hypotheses	2.83	0.82
8	Focuses on theory development	2.82	0.79
11	Employs a novel research methodology or is an exemplary application of a particular methodology	2.81	0.84
13	Unveils embedded assumptions within existing research designs or methodologies	2.80	0.73
14	Uses triangulation or multiple research tools	2.73	0.85
21	Applies existing theoretical frameworks to new or untested samples/populations	2.71	0.76
22	Findings make intuitive sense and connect to common sense notions of reality	2.67	0.88
23	The research combined subjectivist and objective methodologies or research approaches	2.49	0.92
17	The writing style blends storytelling with theory development	2.48	0.93
10	Generates serendipitous findings	2.44	0.86
20	Findings are generalizable to large populations	2.42	0.86
2	Employs sophisticated analytical tools	2.25	0.86
9	Offers instructive details on data and analytical tools	2.25	0.82
3	Uses large (rather than small) samples	2.18	0.85

Table A1.
The importance of attributes in making a study on EE interesting

Note(s): Respondents were asked to rate the attributes on their importance (or contribution) to making a research study on EE interesting, using a four-point Likert scale (1 = unimportant, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = important, 4 = extremely important)

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