About the lives and times of extraordinary entrepreneurs: The methodological contribution of autobiographies to the life course theory of entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT There have been recent calls in the entrepreneurship literature to shift research paradigms toward more relevant, contextual, and process-oriented research. We respond by proposing a life course perspective on firms and their creators using alternative sources of information, specifically life history data included in autobiographies written by the founders of well-known firms. Autobiographies as self-narratives describing how the founders and their firms evolved and any dramatic events that interrupted that process provide unique insights not obtainable from other research materials. This paper introduces retrospective analysis of the life course of entrepreneurs and the evolution of their firms, including critical stages and transitions, and reflection on what was achieved and what was not. To guide researchers, we provide an overview of methodologies used to analyze autobiographies, discuss their strengths and limitations, and suggest potential research designs.

Introduction

Time plays a critical role in the entrepreneurial process in various ways (Lévesque & Stephan, 2020) including the evolution of professional careers in and out of entrepreneurship, the various opportunities recognized and exploited during a firm’s start-up and growth, and the timing of product launches and market entries. In addition, changes in supportive networks and the role of the family over time, and the mobilization of resources over the business life cycle highlight the temporary character of new venture creation. However, McMullen and Dimov (2013) have criticized that most research takes place at a single point in time using static variance-oriented methods and that very few evolutionary studies use a longer time horizon. Accordingly, there have been repeated calls to study entrepreneurship using a process perspective (Baron & Markman, 2004; Lévesque & Stephan, 2020; Shaver &
Scott, 1991) and to use methodologies which capture processes such as longitudinal studies, experience sampling studies, diary studies and archival records studies (Lévesque & Stephan, 2020). However, most of these approaches can only provide snapshots of the entire entrepreneurship process. We argue for a methodology that captures developments over a longer timeline, specifically how an entrepreneurial career or a new business unfolds over entire life events.

This paper suggests the analysis of life course dynamics described in autobiographies, defined as published books on the life course of an entrepreneur, written by the entrepreneur. By using a self-narrative approach entrepreneurs contribute to their own ongoing development and inform a wider audience about the choices they have made in their professional careers and private lives (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Although autobiographies are rarely acknowledged and cited in the academic community,¹ they have become one of the most popular genres in the publishing industry, and some have become bestsellers. Autobiographies give readers insights into the motives of entrepreneurs, the personality they have created for themselves, what they have done throughout their life, and the people, social settings, and conditions that have influenced them along the way. Autobiographies may also inspire nascent entrepreneurs to behave proactively and opportunistically and spur them into action (Rauch and Hulsink, 2015).

Autobiographies show what entrepreneurs actually did and how they did it, and how they initiated and sustained chains of events by their actions, all recounted in their own words. The dynamics of a life and its unfolding over time can also be assessed using other materials, such as biographies, diaries, and oral histories. In this paper we focus on autobiographies to keep the data more homogeneous. Autobiographies also provide first-

¹ In a Google Scholar search (September 21, 2020) we found that only one autobiography of an entrepreneur (Jack Welch) had more than 1,000 citations, two had between 500 and 1,000 (Lee Iacocca and Howard Schultz) and eight had between 250 and 500 (Michael Dell, Andrew Carnegie, David Packard, Tony Hsieh, Sam Walton, Richard Branson, Anita Roddick, and Yvon Chouinard).
person accounts of thoughts, feelings, and relationships. They thus help in understanding entrepreneurship and provide insights that differ from those provided by contemporary entrepreneurship research (Morrison, 2001).

In their entrepreneurial process model, Moroz and Hindle (2012) argue there are two types of focus: the generic, which examines a broad range of entrepreneurial contexts and activities, and the distinct, which concentrates on activities that can be demonstrated to belong uniquely to the domain of entrepreneurship, as distinct from any other social or economic process. The enactive research approach (Johannisson, 2018), in which research is open to the future and forward-looking by enacting a reality but where the understanding of the outcome of the research and the making sense of it takes place afterwards, may be relevant here. It may meet the opposite ends of being sufficiently generic, by featuring all entrepreneurial phenomena, and distinct, by applying to entrepreneurial phenomena alone. In an enactive approach, scholars immerse themselves in the rich world of venturing identifying closely with the identity of the entrepreneur and, once they have finished, they take a step back and systematically reflect on the experiences gained in the process (Johannisson, 2018). We argue that the life course approach to entrepreneurship, where the scholar identifies with the life course of an entrepreneur while almost simultaneously analyzing and reflecting on it, illustrates the enactive approach and hence also meets the twin criteria of being generic and distinct.

An evolutionary study of autobiographies shifts the focus away from cross-sectional accounts of phenomena and toward demonstrating growth, adjustment, and stability over time. An area in need of such an innovative method is the world of life course dynamics, which involves studying how people make sense of their experiences and learning within a social context and how social structures impact their behavior (Aldrich & Kim, 2007; Elder, 1985, 1994). The related concept of life history refers to a lifetime chronology of actions and
events that combines data records on family, education, work, life, and location, including information on changes in mental and physical health, social identity, and emotional well-being. Although applied as a source of information, the life history approach has always been regarded as second best compared to techniques such as structured observation, testing procedures, and interviewing.

“(W)hile the potentialities of the life history are great in aiding our understanding of human behaviour, there is a deplorable absence of a clearly reasoned methodology that has anything to do with the inherent attributes of the life history and the particular areas of experience it may serve to illuminate.” (Watson, 1976, pp. 95–96)

We address this criticism by showing that advanced methodological standards are now available to investigate life course dynamics. Moreover, subjective and personal data sources have hardly been used in entrepreneurship research.

The use of autobiographies is not entirely new as they have been used in organizational behavior, management, and even entrepreneurship research (Mathias & Smith, 2016). We focus on the subdomain of entrepreneurship, which entails the creation of new organizations by one or more proactive individuals (Gartner, 1985) and is a process involving elements of history, family formation, age, and career dynamics, all related to life course theory (Davis and Shaver, 2012). If we treat the everyday life and conversational narratives of an entrepreneur as a (quasi-)text (Pitt, 1998; Rogers, 1984)—a collection of self-reports on what entrepreneurs have been doing and on their accomplishments—we should be able to establish how their careers evolved and their business emerged. We argue that autobiographies provide a sufficiently strong empirical basis for examining and comparing the life course dynamics of entrepreneurs.

The objectives of our paper are twofold: i) to develop a life course approach to entrepreneurship; and ii) to introduce the study of autobiographies as a method for analyzing life course dynamics in entrepreneurship. In line with these two different aims, the literature section first discusses life course theories and then their application by analyzing and
synthesizing life histories and autobiographies of entrepreneurs. We then discuss methodological considerations for life history analysis in entrepreneurship before providing a typology of methods that can be used to analyze autobiographies. The paper concludes by discussing how autobiographies and life course approaches contribute to entrepreneurship research and how they might be used in the future.

Contributions of Process and Life Course Theories to Entrepreneurship

To observe human behavior, social scientists have followed one of two broad methods: the snapshot or structural approach, which acknowledges the impact of intrapersonal variables or views the impact of the social surroundings on the individual; and the movie-like temporal or dynamic approach that traces the story of lives over time. Some have defined this in terms of a distinction between event-based process and outcome-based variance approaches (Aldrich & Martinez, 2001; Van de Ven & Engleman, 2004). Most entrepreneurship studies (about 75–80%) are outcome-based, while event-driven process studies are less frequent (15–20% of studies) (Chandler & Lyon, 2001; Mullen et al., 2009). Thus, process theory and research are still underdeveloped and feature relatively little in the field of entrepreneurship.

Process studies focus on how and why things emerge, develop, grow, and come to an end over time (Langley et al., 2013). These sequences of events, experiences and patterns of change are driven by actions, tensions, and interactions at different levels and are often collected and enacted in stories and recollections. Effective methodological strategies of process research have the following elements: 1) process data, being longitudinal, rich, and varied; 2) process comparisons, including cross-case replication; 3) process decomposition, which requires longitudinal replication; 4) process representation, including the visualization of the dynamics using boxes, maps, and arrows; and 5) process generalization, based on abstracting the general from the specific (Langley et al., 2013).
Pentland’s (1999) process theory uses a narrative approach, moving from description to explanation. Narrative data includes surface features that describe events and experiences over time, but to explain process, theories must be based on deeper structures that are not directly observable. Such a narrative approach must have the following features (Bruner, 1991; Pentland, 1999): i) a clear sequence of a beginning, middle, and end (a sequence in time); ii) focal actors who may be protagonists or antagonists in a thread/plot; iii) an identifiable narrative voice (reflecting some actor’s point of view); iv) an evaluative frame of reference for what is right or wrong, or appropriate or inappropriate; and v) other indicators of context and place.

Life course theory is rooted in development theory (Elder, 1998) and has been applied to entrepreneurship (for example, Aldrich & Kim, 2007; Davis and Shaver, 2012). This approach stresses the developmental relevance of social pathways in the life course (Elder, 1994). The life course approach shows the inner life of individuals, and their struggles, successes, and failures in fulfilling their destiny. It is about the full story of the inner experiences of entrepreneurial individuals, and discovering the confusion, ambiguities, and contradictions they experienced during their lives. The same approach can be applied to the evolution of a new firm, to show the recurrent tensions in developing new products and growing the business in a non-linear way. The life course perspective seeks to reveal patterns of events and changing roles over a person’s life, a process that is shaped by that individual’s behavior and interaction with others, and by changing historical contexts. As argued by Elder (1985, p. 31), the life course approach involves examining a combination of trajectories and transitions that constitute turning points in life and redirecting pathways:

“Life course dynamics take place over an extended span of time, a trajectory of work or marriage, of earnings or self-esteem; and they also evolve within a short time span marked by the transition of specific life events – getting married and divorced, entering and leaving a
job. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning.”

The impact of life transitions and events are contingent on when they occur in people’s lives. Social and historical influences on individual development are mediated through networks of shared relationships and linked lives. Individuals play a constructive and creative role in shaping their own life course. The life course perspective focuses on issues of timing, duration, and the interaction between individuals’ actions and environmental contingencies, such as historical change and the patterning of events and roles over a person’s life span (Elder, 1994). As can be seen in many autobiographies, the narrative account of real life events can sometimes be based on incomplete memories or even creative imagination and sheer fantasy, as individuals recreate their own history based on their recollections, compare their past history and achievements to those of other people, and appraise their present chances of shaping their own future. In analyzing the more managed life course patterns of senior professionals, executives, and business owners, scholars may have to go back to the time when the subjects were young, naive and foolish. In compartmentalized lives of work, family, and a social life, in which events and experiences unfold over time and at different stages, people play different roles, have unique careers, and develop their own identities as a result. In the words of Clausen (1991, p. 806):

“In modern society, the individual has a greater number of potentially available roles to choose among than ever before, but the choices are constrained by the institutional structures within which the person must fit. (..) Rational assessment of opportunities has to a large degree replaced tradition as the primary basis for choices to be made.”

By anticipating and preparing for the future, and interpreting and sometimes reworking the past, individuals construct a reflexive self-identity. Either explicitly or implicitly, life stories deal with the decisions taken during the course of one’s life and the strategic adoption of lifestyle options over time, all organized in terms of the individual’s
projected life span and self-actualization ambitions. As Giddens argued (1991, p. 85): “In a world of alternative lifestyle options, strategic life-planning becomes of special importance (..) Life-planning is a means of preparing a course of future actions mobilized in terms of the self’s biography.” Other terms that have been used for the same phenomenon are “life crafting”, in which people actively reflect on and set goals for all areas of life – social, career and leisure time – and make concrete plans and undertake actions to change these areas in a way that is more congruent with their values and wishes (Schippers and Ziegler, 2019), and “protean careers” involving an orientation towards designing one’s career so that the individual and not the organization is in charge (Hall, 2004).

Entrepreneurship is one such choice which may have implications for an individual’s life partner and wider family, and in some cases for former work colleagues. Obschonka and Silbereisen (2012, p. 108) note “surprisingly little is known about the developmental aspects of entrepreneurship (e.g. early precursors in childhood and adolescence, underlying developmental processes)” Systematic research on career choices is scarce in terms of both theory development and empirical studies (Sinclair, 2008). One exception is Dyer (1992) who introduced the life course perspective into the world of entrepreneurship discussing career dilemmas that influence career choice (individual, social, and economic factors), career socialization (early childhood experiences, work experience, education, and experience prior to start-up), career orientation (role and identity development), and overall career progression (entry, growth, exit but also personal, family, and/or business success).

The domain of entrepreneurship needs more applied theories about the cumulative effects of career decisions and how they are shaped by changing historical contexts. Studying transitions and turning points in people’s lives requires processes that take place over a longer period of time and are sensitive to changing historical circumstances. To investigate how entrepreneurs learn and grow over the course of their life, we have to record their prior
entrepreneurial experiences and map their previous networking and other business-related activities over time, stretching back to when they were a student, a researcher, an employee, a family business successor in waiting, or unemployed. A small but growing literature shows how critical experiences can serve as transition mechanisms during the entrepreneurial process, both in the period immediately before start-up and during the formative years of the new business (Chell & Pittaway, 1998; Cope, 2011; Elfring & Hulsink, 2019). During these formative years, the new entrepreneur and firm encounter a large number of unpredictable critical experiences and events that shape the entrepreneurial process, the networking activity, and the final outcome. These include external events that affect the entrepreneur or the business, and other experiences that result from actions taken by the entrepreneur and the business. Some experiences affect the “entrepreneurial decision” or the business idea being pursued, while others affect the resources of the business or some aspect of its performance.

The family household also plays a role in the development of entrepreneurial careers and in the start-up, growth, and transfer of new businesses. Not only do specific family settings and transitions within the family facilitate the seizing of opportunities and creation of new ventures, there are also various points and phases in the entrepreneurial cycle at which senior and junior family members play a decisive role (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Dyer & Handler, 1994). For instance, next-generation entrepreneurs may be exposed to the pros and cons of business ownership by parents or grandparents and may make regular visits to the family firm during their adolescence. They may acquire some initial experience of operational and managerial responsibilities through part-time or summer jobs, followed by full-time employment in the firm. These activities prepare the future owners of the family firm for their role as successor. Another element is the critical role played by life partners and other family members as co-founders of the business and in the subsequent growth stages of the firm. At a later stage, the family plays a role in the transfer of the firm from one
generation to the next. A process study by Chalus-Sauvannet et al. (2016) examining unexpected succession in family firms illustrates how the ordering of family enterprise considerations and professional and personal motivations changed over time during the course of the entrepreneurs’ lives. They explored why and how family firm successors who initially established promising careers outside the family firm later changed their minds and returned to take over the family firm.

The Distinctive Contribution of Autobiographies to Entrepreneurship Theory

Allport (1942, p. 56) was among the first to recommend the use of personal documents in psychological science: “psychology needs to concern itself with life as it is lived, with significant total processes of the sort revealed in consecutive and complete life documents.” Autobiographies are life documents that cover long periods. These historical personal narratives and life stories connect the inner world of a person to the world outside. A first-person account of life experiences and mind-changing stories can motivate and encourage readers and observers; as one serial entrepreneur said: “There is nothing as inspirational as an autobiography” (Allen 2001, p. x). Also, as Merton (1988) notes, autobiographers are both insiders and outsiders. They are in a dual participant–observer role and have privileged and exclusive access to their own inner experience. Autobiographers can also draw on introspection and retrospection, generating unique insights for the study of the life course dynamics of entrepreneurs.

The Application and Analysis of Autobiographies in Entrepreneurship Research

Entrepreneurship scholars have conducted a number of studies that analyze autobiographies; our search identified 23 such studies2. Thus, this type of study is not absent

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2 We conducted a systematic search for autobiographies in Econlit, ABI/Inform, and Google Scholar using the keyword combination entrepren* and autobiograp*. Since Google Scholar identified about
from entrepreneurship research, though none of these studies were published in the top entrepreneurship journals. Our search results indicate these studies are heterogeneous. For example, autobiographies have been used to study a variety of topics, including attitudes, identity, the emergence of an industry, leadership, networking, marketing, and resilience. Some studies are more holistic in their approach and examine how entrepreneurs develop an identity or form their own narrative, while others examine more specific issues, such as marketing or networking. This indicates that autobiographies provide rich information, which might be useful for research purposes. About half of the studies analyzed a single autobiography (13 of the 23 studies). Single case studies can be useful, particularly when the results of the case analysis negate an accepted theoretical proposition. They may also provide opportunities to analyze a case that is unusual or particularly extreme. Naturally, such studies are not suitable for making generalizations. Of the ten studies that analyzed multiple autobiographies, seven analyzed both autobiographies and biographies, without differentiating between them. However, these two are markedly different: they may well be written with different motives, and may be based on different conventions. Surprisingly, not all studies analyzing autobiographies looked at entrepreneurial processes. Eight studies did not analyze processes at all, and those that did often did not investigate the whole life course. This indicates the need to develop a consistent framework for analyzing the life course dynamics of entrepreneurs. Finally, five studies did not provide any information about how the autobiography was analyzed. Other studies mentioned the type of analysis undertaken without sharing details of the analysis itself within the paper. Those studies that shared such information built on very different ontological assumptions. This indicates how important it

21,600 results, we restricted our research to those in the first 10 pages. Due to space limits we removed a discussion of these individual studies and a comparison of their distinctive contributions, including a large and extensive table. The background note and table are available from the authors of this paper on request.
is to develop more detailed guidelines for using qualitative information in entrepreneurship research (Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte, 2014).

A good example of an autobiographical approach to life course analysis in entrepreneurship is Reveley (2010). By critically examining the autobiography of the 19th-century British entrepreneur and trader Jules Joubert, Reveley (2010) provides an interesting example of life planning and identity crafting. Joubert wrote selectively about events and episodes in his life to fit with the adventurer storyline he had in mind. According to Joubert, he enters regularly into a series of new adventures when he is confronted by bad luck or is betrayed by people, but the hard-working businessman (also an idealized image of himself) takes extreme risks that ultimately pay off. Joubert managed his narrative identity carefully by being economical with the truth and withholding any information that would discredit him, and he was skilful at impression management. As Reveley (2010) notes, an autobiography should not be seen as a repository of truth, but it is first and foremost a personal identity document in which personal goals are formulated and reflected upon, and in which an image is created. The study is a good example of an analysis of an autobiography as it investigates long-term processes, it uses a single case study, which is well justified by focusing on understanding how an entrepreneur creates his identity and self-image rather than on generalization, and it describes the narratological methodology in detail. Thus, autobiographies of entrepreneurs can provide useful insights to the entrepreneurship literature.

**The Contribution to Entrepreneurship of a Life Course Analysis of Autobiographies**

The approach suggested here involves analyzing qualitative information from autobiographies. Qualitative data is valuable when it relates to either an extreme or a unique case, a typical case that captures the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or
commonplace situation, when it provides a key opportunity to test and develop theory, when it describes context and process evolving over time (Yin, 2003) and when looking at relevance (March et al., 1991).

Analyzing extreme cases can be valuable where something exceptional seems to be occurring and when the investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon that was previously inaccessible to scientific investigation, such as family firms like Heineken that have done extraordinarily well over generations (Smit, 2014). However, as these firms cannot be analyzed relying on primary data, a long time frame must also be used, which takes account of the family’s history (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005). Hidden champions (Simon, 2009) are extraordinary entrepreneurs from less well known firms that achieve a substantial worldwide market share with their superior services and products. However, neither is in the public eye, and it is therefore not possible to devise a representative sample. Other outliers might be high-growth firms, and unicorns in particular, or destructive entrepreneurship (Shepherd, 2019). For example, some studies have examined the economics of a crack gang (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000) or the drug dealer as an emergent entrepreneur (Frith & McElwee, 2007), which could both be considered destructive entrepreneurship (Baumol, 1996). Getting access to gangs is not easy, for obvious reasons, and it is therefore impossible to draw a representative sample. Similarly, assessing whether entrepreneurs’ behavior and practices have changed since industrialization would require a sample that included entrepreneurs who are not alive anymore, but it could be very important to learn whether specific phenomena are new or whether they existed a long time ago. When studying age and ‘senior entrepreneurship’ in particular (Matos et al., 2018), autobiographies can shed light on the transitions to self-employment of people relatively late in their careers.

Second, qualitative studies are useful where current perspectives are either unclear or conflicting and where case study evidence could help to provide novel insights and more
robust theories. In entrepreneurship, Sarasvathy (2009) has examined expert entrepreneurs to develop effectuation theory. In a similar way, autobiographies have been used to develop a theory on the self-realization of entrepreneurs (Schoenberger, 2001).

Third, analysis of life course dynamics can be used to account for the context and situational specifics. Even though there are strong arguments that economic behavior needs to be understood in its context (Welter, 2011), the context is often just controlled for or reduced to a set of moderating variables. A core advantage of autobiographies is that the rich description enables important elements of the context to be identified and measured even over time. Also, autobiographies allow coding of the context at different levels of analysis that takes into account the complex nature of environmental conditions. The inclusion of context is important in management as it provides valuable information about the generalizability of findings.

Fourth, autobiographies allow us to look at phenomena that occur over long periods of time. Elaborating on this, Pettigrew (1990) has argued for a longitudinal comparative case method, which should allow the study of different temporal patterns in the process of organizing and at different levels supported by contextual analysis. A process and longitudinal perspective is extremely valuable, since it can shed light on the time-dependent yet constrained sequences of actors and the events and activities they take part in, and the continuities and discontinuities in this dynamic and evolutionary process (Pettigrew, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992). Entrepreneurship scholars have also argued for a focus on entrepreneurial events and on tracing and examining the flow of events and interactions over time (Bygrave, 1993; Gersick, 1994). Taking a longer-term perspective of this kind would include looking not only at the critical start-up phase with its liabilities of newness, smallness, and adolescence but also at the next, more ambitious, stages that are driven by intentions to innovate, to make the business grow, and perhaps to develop business activities abroad.
While some entrepreneurs maintain a small but stable business or establish a more dynamic and expanding firm, others may sell their existing business and re-enter entrepreneurship and become serial entrepreneurs by starting or acquiring new firms.

To examine how entrepreneurs start and develop their business, longitudinal research designs are needed, focusing on entrepreneurs’ accumulation of experiences, routines, and competences and on the development of their business(es). Some studies have attempted to do this and have interpreted entrepreneurship as setting out on a journey in which the opportunity and the proactive individuals gradually unfold and co-evolve into a new venture, which to some extent also shapes its founders and adjusts the ‘claim to fame’ of a business (Aldrich & Kenworthy, 1999; McMullen & Dimov, 2013; Morris et al., 2012). The emergence, growth, and consolidation of the entrepreneur’s career and the business(es) are not necessarily goal-driven, with success guaranteed. Entrepreneurs may have a vague hunch about where the venture is going, but the final destination is not known. They or their founding team may get a boost from an investor that speeds up creating a dynamic company or they may become distracted by particular requests from customers and consequently change direction.

Finally, analyzing autobiographies enables “real-world” issues to be looked at, or issues that matter in practice. Since autobiographies describe what happened to the subject, there can be no doubt that the results of such analysis are relevant to the world. Autobiographies also help explain the “big events” that happen to entrepreneurs during their life course. User-inspired research requires such validity, and analysis of autobiographies is thus relevant to knowledge creation. In their provocative article on drawing lessons from ‘one case or less’, March et al. (1991) argue that organizations can learn from one critical event, an exceptional set of experiences, and unique historical outcomes. Ideas about these unique processes drawn from a detailed case study are used by organizations to develop the whole
distribution of possible events and futures, including those that did not occur, near-histories (events that almost happened), and hypothetical histories (events that might have happened under certain conditions that did not occur but were plausible) (March et al., 1991).

Methodological Considerations: The analysis of autobiographies

Our approach can be applied to some substantive research questions in management and entrepreneurship. Because its application requires different methodologies from other qualitative studies, we discuss the methodological considerations in more detail. We do not aim to provide “how to do” guides here as those can be found elsewhere, both for autobiographies (Crayne & Hunter, 2018; Mathias & Smith, 2016) or for more general methods for aggregating qualitative research (Hoon, 2013; Rauch et al., 2014). Our discussion about methodological considerations focus on potential biases, sampling autobiographies, and methods to analyse autobiographies.

Potential Biases in Analysing Autobiographies

Analyzing autobiographies has certain methodological advantages. For example, life course data is necessarily “unobtrusive” and “nonreactive,” and thus cannot be contaminated by experimenter effects (Simonton, 2003). Despite these advantages, there are also some risks and difficulties in both the information provided in autobiographies and the person undertaking the analysis. Autobiographies may be written for very different reasons—for example, to inform, persuade, educate, or entertain the reader or for the purposes of self-justification, exhibitionism, relief from tension, literary delight, leading by example or public service. They might also be written as a means of therapy or out of a desire for immortality (Allport, 1942). In addition, they might help the author in other ways, perhaps by facilitating reflection and life crafting. These different aims might even affect the style, which might be
more emotional if the aim is to persuade the reader about something, but more cognitive if educating the reader is the main purpose. Thus autobiographies are constructed, facts might be reconstructed or altered, and truth might be replaced by authenticity and imaginative reconstruction. Finally, such alterations might not even be based on conscious decisions by the autobiographer but caused by self-serving biases, recall biases, attribution biases, and implicit conventions on writing an autobiography. Thus, there are shortcomings that must be addressed when analyzing autobiographies.

For example, the motives of the autobiographer might affect a number of different self-serving biases. Autobiographies might be hagiographic, and thus written with the purpose of presenting oneself to look better than one really is. One example of this is Jules Joubert’s autobiography (Reveley, 2010). Fortunately, hagiographic behavior can now be detected more easily, given the huge amount of information available on the internet. However, whether the greater likelihood of detecting hagiographic material through modern search technologies will lead to more accurate information in the future is not yet clear. Importantly, such self-serving distortions might also happen unconsciously, as people tend to defend and justify their actions and circumstances when they reflect retrospectively.

Retrospection in general has the risk of recall biases, such as recalling events or experiences from the past incorrectly (Podsakoff et al., 2003) or not recalling them at all. While such inaccuracies might be insightful for some types of analysis, they affect the validity of the information in autobiographies. Therefore, the researcher needs to collect additional information to validate conclusions.

In addition, autobiographers are prone to attribution biases, namely systematic errors, when explaining the reasons for their own behavior. For example, in ambiguous situations, which are typical for entrepreneurs, people are more likely to draw on self-serving attributions to explain the causes of certain behaviors. They are also more likely to attribute
success to their own effort (Jones & Harris, 1967), and autobiographies of entrepreneurs are often full of success stories. Some authors argue that entrepreneurship is in general biased toward individual agency (Welter et al., 2019), and this tendency might be encouraged by analysis of autobiographies. Thus, while we argue that autobiographies provide a valuable way of looking at entrepreneurship in context, the researcher must be aware that autobiographers might avoid explaining their behaviors by the situations in which they occur.

Another disadvantage of life history data is that the data has low internal validity. For example, identified relationships can be easily affected by confounding or omitted variables, and causal interpretation is thus difficult. Additionally, inductive reviews of life course dynamics in particular have potentially low power due to theoretical saturation and limited generalizability. There are also conventions about how life stories are told, focusing on starting points and turning-point experiences.

Finally, autobiographers might have co-writers to help compile the autobiography. For example, Edward Whitley helped Richard Branson (2010) write Losing My Virginity, and it is not documented which parts were written by whom. The book most likely contains both biographical and autobiographical elements. Comparative studies can deal with that very well just by comparing co-written autobiographies with those that had no co-writer. However, studies aiming to analyze the self-narrative of an entrepreneur should perhaps only include material that was not co-written.

In summary, analyzing autobiographies is a complex exercise. Therefore, it is critical to assess what this approach can achieve and what it cannot. Importantly, some of the problems of analyzing life course dynamics stem not so much from the autobiography per se but rather from the premises the analysis is based on: its aims and the conceptual frameworks used (see, for example, Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014). Some types of analysis are particularly concerned with the subjective interpretations inherent in the autobiography as the
researchers wants to reveal how entrepreneurs develop their identity. Other types of analysis are more interested in hypothesis testing and generalizations, and therefore require explicit effort to validate the information provided in the autobiography (Crayne & Hunter, 2018).

**Sampling Autobiographies**

In general, most entrepreneurship research aims to study representative samples, even though it is seldom possible to draw random samples in entrepreneurship research (Davidsson, 2004). In these situations, rigorous synthesis of quantitative research usually calls for an exhaustive sampling strategy to allow generalizations to be made from the evidence available (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). However, such a strategy might not work for the analysis of autobiographies. First, it is more difficult to identify qualitative research in general, increasing the risk that some autobiographies may be overlooked. Second, the number of available autobiographies of entrepreneurs huge. For example, in 1958 Redlich published a list of more than 300 autobiographies of entrepreneurs; this list was not complete at that time and would certainly be far larger today. Given that analyzing autobiographies is time-consuming and resource-intensive simply because of the amount of available data, exhaustive sampling may not be feasible. An obvious solution is to use purposive sampling, which provides information-rich data and allows autobiographies to be studied in depth. There are, however, different purposive sampling strategies, and any analysis of autobiographies must consider the specific advantages and disadvantages of each type of sampling. For a detailed overview of sampling, see Patton (2002) and Suri (2011).

There are three sampling scenarios. In the first scenario, the researcher wants to find out what entrepreneurs do in general, and to identify patterns in how entrepreneurs recognize opportunities, acquire resources and collaborators, and become successful. Typically, this type of research focuses on a normative tradition. To achieve such aims, the researcher might
want to sample *typical cases*, thus entrepreneurs who are not extraordinary but who are to some extent representative of the population of entrepreneurs as a whole. Generalizations can also be achieved by sampling *critical cases* that reflect, for example, the variability inherent in entrepreneurship. For example, some ordinary entrepreneurs might have done extraordinary things and experienced great success; they may, for example, have started fast-growth firms, the so-called “gazelles” that create most new jobs. Accordingly, some studies have used panel data to identify determinants of fast-growth firms (Henrekson & Johansson, 2010; Lopez-Garcia & Puente, 2012). This type of research is important as the determinants of fast growth are not necessarily the same as the determinants of average or normal growth, with non-linearities in the growth process of firms.

In the second scenario, researchers aim to sample *relevant cases* rather than representative samples. Studying entrepreneurs who carry out ordinary activities builds on the assumption that they do something different: they start out just a little bit better, such as exploring and exploiting initial advantages and building on them, seeking arbitrary patronage, and benefiting from extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies. For example, some entrepreneurs may have set themselves apart from others by disrupting an entire industry and therefore are very distinctive. It would be hard to argue that such cases are representative of the general population of entrepreneurs. However, these cases might provide insights that are relevant to the field. Relevant samples might be selected precisely because the participants are different from the population at large, as the behavior and achievements of these individuals are not found in the general population. Typical examples in this research stream are studies on mental health, starting with the observations made by Kets de Vries (1996) of dramatic cases of entrepreneurs and the correlational studies of Johnson et al. (2018) which linked entrepreneurship to mania. The notion in this type of research is that some people become entrepreneurs because some aspect of their temperament, disposition or character
makes them less suited to working in mainstream organizational settings. For example, Verheul et al. (2016) argued that people with extreme attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are more likely to become entrepreneurs. Researchers in this stream do not claim that these entrepreneurs perform unique and different actions, but rather that they recognize and exploit opportunities and align resources, just as any entrepreneur does. Extraordinary entrepreneurs are studied because they are assumed to perform similar venturing activities—opportunity recognition and aligning resources and collaborators—as all other entrepreneurs.

In the third scenario, researchers aim to investigate extraordinary entrepreneurs precisely because their extraordinary venturing activities set them apart from others by, for example, building extremely successful companies. To our knowledge, this type of research is missing from the scientific entrepreneurship literature. The activities of entrepreneurs such as James Dyson or Elon Musk are entirely different from those in everyday entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, extraordinary entrepreneurs with their extraordinary activities may at least provide some clues to help ordinary entrepreneurs become more effective at what they do, or at least understand why such levels of success will remain beyond their reach. Studying the autobiographies of such individuals might be important when sampling extreme or deviant cases, to highlight how extremes of success or failure can occur in certain circumstances. However, generalizations are difficult to make with this sampling strategy.

**The Analysis of Autobiographies**

In general, autobiographies can be viewed as a specific type of qualitative data, and, depending on the research question, different approaches have been used to analyze them. The various different methodologies can be classified into two broad research types (Simonton, 1990): ideographic studies and nomothetic studies. These differ in their aims, their philosophical foundation, the type of data used, the techniques used for the synthesis,
and the extent to which they aim to generalize the research findings. We use this distinction to discuss several approaches to analyzing autobiographical information\(^3\). These approaches are not exhaustive but provide illustrative examples.

*Ideographic studies*

Ideographic studies often favor the examination of a single case and concentrate on the particular and unique creative individual. Single case studies of exceptional individuals, like Reveley’s paper on Jules Joubert and his autobiography (Reveley, 2010), may serve as a unique instructional tool or role model for social learning, inspiration, and emulation, and may help to make abstract principles more concrete and generalization easier to grasp, but they can never prove a general and universal rule. Thus, such approaches use inductive techniques to arrive at new interpretations and theoretical insights. The aim is to provide an ideographic interpretation that takes into account the context and even the researcher’s interpretation. However, ideographic studies are not restricted to single cases. Some methods allow integrating multiple autobiographies and, even when multiple cases are used, the aim of such studies is theory development and theoretical generalization. This type of study requires researchers to obtain the actual meaning and interpretations of autobiographies, and conventional evaluation criteria such as reliability and validity may therefore not apply. Nevertheless, it is imperative to apply appropriate evaluation criteria in a reflexive manner that allows the quality of the analysis to be assessed. This might include an assessment of credibility (authentic representation, triangulation (Jick, 1979)), transferability (extent of applicability), dependability (minimization of researcher idiosyncrasies), and confirmability (researcher self-criticism) (Johnson et al., 2006). While these evaluation criteria are useful, they might need to be used in a nuanced way in each type of ideographic analysis.

\(^3\) Please see Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte (2014) for a more detailed discussion about methodological choices in qualitative entrepreneurship research.
(Meta-)Ethnographic Analysis. Meta-ethnography is an example of how to integrate multiple cases in an ideographic approach. Ethnographic analysis is a method “to develop an inductive and interpretive form of knowledge synthesis” (Noblit and Hare, 1988, p. 16). By combining and synthesizing qualitative case studies, meta-ethnography seeks to learn from a collection of individually unique cases by making connections between unique cases of experiences and events and identifying any commonality between these cases. This may eventually lead to a solid explanation across the case studies, the construction of interpretations and refutations, and perhaps a reconceptualization. Meta-ethnography involves induction, constant comparison, mutual translation and interpretation, and final synthesis. The final outcome of such a synthesis is the translation of studies into one another, whether successful or not, which stimulates the researcher to understand and transfer ideas, concepts, and metaphors across different studies.

In principle, ethnographic studies can address many different research questions. They have been extensively used to study questions on identity research (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) and social discourse. Moreover, ethnography can allow researchers to look at special cases that cannot be examined using quantitative approaches. In addition, analyzing autobiographies through ethnographic principles might be useful to examine the interactive process of co-creation with others; this research area has not been explored extensively using research methodologies of any kind.

The seven steps in Noblit and Hare’s meta-ethnography (1988) are: 1) getting started; 2) deciding what is relevant to the initial interest; 3) reading the studies; 4) determining how the studies are related; 5) translating the studies into one another; 6) synthesizing translations; and finally 7) expressing the synthesis. Key concepts in meta-ethnography are defining the main commonalities or overarching metaphors of a study and determining whether or not it is possible to compare studies and translate them into each other. Three types of synthesis could
result from a meta-ethnography. First, when the studies are about similar things and the accounts are directly comparable, this will lead to reciprocal translations. Second, when the accounts are significantly different and the studies refute one another, a refutational synthesis will result. Finally, when the studies combine to provide an overarching interpretation or to build a line of argument, the outcome will be a line of argument synthesis. One of the strengths of (meta-)ethnographic studies is their ability to arrive at higher-order theories. The method is also useful for analyzing new phenomena—relating, for example, to interactive processes of co-creation (Davidsson, 2017)—which are difficult to measure by other means. However, a weakness is that meta-ethnography does not provide any guidelines on sampling. It relies on the researcher’s judgement to select key autobiographies that will be useful for studying the phenomenon under investigation. There are different forms of meta-ethnography that provide more or less strict guidelines on how to conduct such a study (Davidsson, 2017). To our knowledge, no study has analyzed the autobiography of an entrepreneur using an ethnographic methodology. An entrepreneurship study that did use an ethnographic approach is Morawska’s (1996) study of a Jewish community over a substantial period of time using life stories provided as self-narratives. The study explained how the Jewish community created within a local economy a tight-knit, ethnically based entrepreneurial niche, and pursued their main life goals within it to achieve a satisfactory standard of living, despite the recurrent slumps in local mills and coal mines, and to enjoy the company of others within their community. Morawska (1997) provided detailed information on how she collected the data and reflected on her role in the research process.

*Critical narrative analysis.* Narrative analysis is a genre of analytic frames in which researchers interpret stories that are told within the context of research. It tries to understand elements of that story to reach an interpretation of how people are representing themselves, for example, what the story is aiming to achieve, what motives are present in the stories, and
what identities are at stake. As a genre of interpretation it includes several different frameworks. Typically, this form of analysis and interpretation focuses on different elements in the narrative such as structural, functional, thematic, and dialogic elements. Therefore, narrative analysis allows a holistic interpretation of an individual’s life history, allowing the researcher to analyze conflicting and changing elements and to map the dynamics and complexity of that history. Narrative analysis is not very common in management research (with the exception of organizational theory), possibly because it has a number of limitations. For example, interpretations that are distorted by subjectivity may not be generalizable, and there can also be subject manipulation and self-selection of target audiences. Narrative analysis has been used to analyze the autobiographies of entrepreneurs. For instance, Reveley’s (2010) analysis of Jules Joubert’s autobiography examined filtering (selective attention to events), ellipsis (erasure of events), and segues (transitions in the text). It provides a good description of the methodology, confirming that Joubert was economical with the truth, if not occasionally altogether mendacious (Reveley, 2010, p. 302).

Nomothetic Studies

A nomothetic explanation is contingent on certain unique features of gifted people, such as the specific geographical location where the special person grew up or achieved success, particular periods in their life, or the personal idiosyncrasies of that individual. Nomothetic inquiries stress universal human behavior and seek to identify general laws, thereby ignoring peculiarities of person, place, and time. Often studies arrive at quantitative results and aim for generalizable insights. Different nomothetic approaches can be used to study autobiographies. Since nomothetic studies aim to achieve generalization, there is even greater onus on the researcher to demonstrate that the conclusions drawn are reliable and valid. Often demographic or psychometric data is available in autobiographies, such as
proxies for human capital, school education, cognitive ability and personality. Such information can be accurate but, nevertheless, it is vulnerable to the various biases discussed earlier. In most cases, researchers collect information about constructs and relationships indirectly. Thus, the autobiography provides the raw data, and the researchers then analyze that data based on their own interpretations and understanding of the data. The information provided in the autobiography needs to be coded and categorized, following the same rationale as any coding of qualitative research. Assessing the reliability of the information collected can be done in the same way as in any research that collects primary data, by assessing interrater reliability and internal consistency. However, establishing the validity of indirect measures is sometimes difficult. Therefore, it is important to find a way to validate the information collected independently—for example, by conducting separate investigations of a construct.

**Historiometric analysis.** Historiometric studies seek generalizations by reducing autobiographical information into a much smaller set of abstract statements about how a special class of individuals have in some way changed the course of history. Accordingly, the typical research questions are comparative, such as how do entrepreneurs compare to non-entrepreneurs and what makes entrepreneurs more successful or more innovative? Historiometric inquiries generally prefer to analyze multiple cases (Simonton, 1990). Researchers also need to extract quantitative information and therefore use content analysis to analyze the autobiographical information. Crayne and Hunter (2018) published a 10-step guide on how to conduct a historiometric analysis. This approach is particularly useful when studying long-term processes, unique samples, or contexts that affect the particular relationship of interest (Crayne & Hunter, 2018). Nevertheless, it also has weaknesses. Some of them are inherent in the use of autobiographical data, such as the biases discussed above. The relationships identified can often be affected by confounding and omitted variables, and
causal links are thus difficult to determine. There is also a tendency to emphasize the individual and ignore the effects of different contexts. Finally, quantitative analysis is restricted by the number of autobiographies being analyzed.

Despite these weaknesses, historiometry has highlighted the importance of role models and mentors, creative and intellectual precociousness, birth-order position and positive effects for first-borns (and, to a lesser extent, the youngest child), other family background conditions (such as orphanhood or childhood traumas), the curvilinear relationship between formal education, special training, and accomplishment, the Matthew effect (that is, the principle of cumulative advantage in lifetime productivity), and special physical and psychological conditions (for example, addiction and dyslexia) (Simonton, 1984, 1990, 1999). Smith (2005) and Duchek (2018) both used autobiographies of entrepreneurs in variants of this approach, though neither study quantified the information extracted from the autobiographies. With the aim of identifying generalizable insights about how entrepreneurs develop their storybook, Smith (2005) analyzed 10 biographies and autobiographies of entrepreneurs to identify themes and interrelated patterns. Duchek (2018) started her analysis of eight biographies and autobiographies in an inductive way using grounded theory, and then used content analysis to arrive at generalizable information about how entrepreneurs develop resilience.

**Critical incidents.** Critical incident methodology (Flanagan, 1954) is the investigation of significant occurrences (events, crises, or turning points) identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of the effects as perceived by the respondent. These critical incidents can be seen as inputs for learning (through improvisation techniques or other ways of discontinuous, transformative, or double-loop learning) and management (for example, coping with new information and contacts and developing alternative strategies) (Cope & Watts, 2000). They may also induce a virtuous cycle that
includes cumulative successes, such as registering a patent, winning an award, or mobilizing funds effectively, but it can also lead to a vicious cycle involving successive failures and setbacks, such as losing a key employee, followed by dissatisfied customers. This type of life course approach provides insights into the choices entrepreneurs have made during critical incidents about the challenges, options and consequences of their activities. When circumstances change dramatically, both the founders and their firm have to be resilient, maintaining their efforts to stay true to their core purpose and preserve their integrity and the identity of the firm (Basque & Langley, 2018). In the field of entrepreneurship, studies on resilience have examined how and why some entrepreneurs develop effective coping strategies that enable them to deal with critical events while others do not. Relevant questions are: Do networks help to avoid seeing crises as insurmountable (Davidsson, 2004)? Do entrepreneurs develop resilience by acquiring more life experience and more experience of doing business and of overcoming rough economic times and unforeseen life events (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003)? How do habitual entrepreneurs learn from business experience and unpleasant events and develop the ability to create more ventures (Spivack, McKelvie, & Haynie, 2014)?

While such questions have generally been examined using interviews, we argue that they could also be used to study autobiographies, as these include such critical events, are not dependent on retrospection and memory, and focus on real-life human experiences. Flanagan (1954) offers guidelines for data collection and analysis with the assumption that the researcher will be conducting an interview, but also recognizes that such information could be collected from written records. Critical incidents could include incidents that make a contribution to the firm but also ones that affect the entrepreneur’s family life. The data collected may include facts as well as decisions and emotions associated with the incident, and the solution adopted. The method provides information that can be quantified. Moreover,
it is based on the participants’ subjectivity, as they are the ones who determine what was critical in their life course. Finally, it helps to gain a better understanding of the context in which these events occurred. However, it is often difficult to determine precisely which incidents need to be analyzed. In addition, the analysis can easily result in some descriptive categories that may or may not provide room for inferential interpretations. Finally, even if events occur sequentially, the analysis is entirely cross-sectional and thus does not allow any causal interpretation.

To our knowledge, critical incident methodology has not been used to analyze autobiographies, though it has been used in entrepreneurship research (Chell & Pittaway, 1998; Cope & Watts, 2000). These studies used interviews to identify critical incidents retrospectively and to relate them to some firm-level outcomes. For example, Cope and Watts (2000) examined learning processes and analyzed six small-scale business owners. The critical incidents identified all focused on the development of the business venture. They showed that emotionally laden, prolonged, and often traumatic events enabled learning through the business life cycle.

**Systematic synthesis.** Autobiographies may also be analyzed by applying more traditional qualitative research methods (for example, Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003) and systematic literature reviews (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). Again, the research questions may be comparative and even involve some quantitative measures: Are entrepreneurs different from non-entrepreneurs? What are the predictors of performance, business creation, or serial entrepreneurship? Such questions inevitably require the analysis of multiple autobiographies. These reviews have become more standardized and may combine deductive analysis with induction (Hoon, 2013). There are also guides on how to use systematic synthesis to analyze autobiographies. For example, Rauch et al. (2014) suggested combining content analysis of each case with subsequent cross-case analysis that involves techniques such as pattern
matching. This combined method enables the researcher to summarize the literature and test theories. The analysis may take context issues into account as well as the decision made. However, the method is still criticized, as it often provides only frequency counts, for example, on how many entrepreneurs had self-employed parents. It is also vulnerable to several information-processing biases because of the number of subjective decisions being made by the researcher (Rauch, 2020). Habersang et al. (2019) used this type of methodology for a process study of a business life cycle, analyzing 43 case studies, and found that processes of firm failure can be interpreted as an interplay between distinct rigidity and conflict mechanisms.

**Network analysis.** Network analysis has been used to study autobiographies (Elfring & Hulsink, 2019; Lauchs & Staines, 2012; Morselli, 2001). Autobiographies provide a useful source of information about how networks change during the course of an entrepreneurial career. Such studies do not aim to explain the entrepreneurial process in a holistic way but rather focus on a specific aspect—the network—and how it evolves, changes, and matures over an entrepreneurial career. Network analysis is a term for a set of techniques to analyze an individual’s relationships with others. Most of these approaches are structural, based on empirical data, and use statistical techniques to analyze the data. They sometimes also use graphical visualization techniques to map relationships between entities based on the symmetry or asymmetry of their proximity to one another. There are many different ways to conduct a network analysis. Many early approaches used simple questionnaire studies to analyze networks (Collins & Clark, 2003), and others used techniques such as name-generator or position-generator techniques (Batjargal, 2010). Some also used simulation studies and specific software that allowed them to conduct a detailed network analysis (Tan et al., 2015). With increasing digitalization, there are a number of apps that can be used to conduct network analysis. Network analyses have the advantage of being well validated in
terms of, for example, how knowledge and information flow through networks. They can also
be used to make connections between entrepreneurs and their firms and their personal and
business contacts, as, for example, found in autobiographies. For example, Body Shop
founder Anita Roddick (1991) describes in her autobiography how she had links with like-
minded entrepreneurs Richard Branson and Yvon Chouinard, both of whom have also written
autobiographies. Network analysis is therefore suitable for looking at whole cohorts of
entrepreneurs and how they developed and changed their interconnected networks. A
weakness of this approach is that it uses proxies to measure knowledge and knowledge flow,
and the mechanism by which entrepreneurs develop and transfer knowledge is therefore not
apparent. Elfring and Hulsink (2019) used an autobiography and a biography to analyze the
dynamic nature of networks of entrepreneurs and how they change over time in response to
uncertainty.

Table 1 lists the methods for analyzing autobiographies discussed above, but this list is
not exhaustive. For example, Mathias and Smith (2016) suggested using interpretative text
analysis to analyze autobiographies. The method is useful as it allows researchers to search
for keywords and specify the context in which they appear. However, the focus of
interpretative text analysis is not so much on the temporal aspect that is important to
understand the life course of entrepreneurs. Meta-synthesis is another useful approach that
has been developed to produce interpretive translations, grand narratives, or theories by
integrating or comparing the findings from qualitative studies (Clemmens, 2003). As such,
meta-synthesis expands qualitative research by elevating the uniqueness of individual studies
into an interpretive whole. To our knowledge, the method has not been used in
entrepreneurship research. There are many methods for analyzing autobiographies, and the
method selected depends on the research question being addressed.
The analysis of autobiographies may sometimes require even more radical methodologies than those described above. Given that autobiographies might emphasize certain critical events and leave out other everyday events, interpreting them may involve intuition and experience. In that process the researcher becomes part of the dialogue between the entrepreneur, the action, and the situation in which these actions occur and uses the researcher’s own collection of these entrepreneurial experiences as a basis for generating insights from autobiographies (Joas, 1996; Johannisson, 2018).

**An Illustrative Example how to Answer Research Questions by Analyzing Autobiographies**

Table 2 provides two illustrative examples of research questions that demand either an ideographic or a nomothetic approach. It is useful to examine the differences between these two examples by considering the aim of the study, the data and the sampling strategy, the data analysis, and the assessment of study quality.

In the ideographic example, the aim is to develop knowledge about the life crafting of entrepreneurs. Life crafting is about having or finding a purpose in life (Schippers and Ziegler, 2019). This is a novel and interesting research avenue, as entrepreneurs are not only motivated by firm success but entrepreneurship is also a way of life⁴—and we do not know of any study that has examined the whole life course of entrepreneurs to detect how, when, and why they do life crafting. In this example, we have applied this idea to the autobiographies of three entrepreneurs who are known to have crafted their own life in such a way and more specifically how they described themselves in their autobiographies: Anita Roddick (environmental activist), Yvon Chouinard (adventurer), and Richard Branson (venturing has

⁴ We would like to thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.
to be fun). To answer the question, the autobiographies of these entrepreneurs may be used for both exploratory and confirmatory reasons. Thus, they might be explored to investigate how each of these individuals developed their identity and at what point they started to develop their particular purpose in life. At the same time, it might be very interesting to explore whether they adhere consistently to one vision of themselves or one particular ambition when crafting their life. Was Anita Roddick always interested in environmental matters? When did she actually start to donate to environmental causes or projects? Such questions would necessarily require the researcher to look for additional information that may or may not confirm the information found in the autobiography. One method that could be used for a study of this kind is meta-ethnography, which would allow the researcher to translate and to analyze and compare the results of all of the autobiographies.

An example of a nomothetic study is displayed in the last two columns of Table 2. The aim of the study is to understand how the family of the entrepreneur affects the evolution and development of the firm. In general, this question is not new, as there is validated evidence to show that having entrepreneurial parents increases the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur and of being successful (Unger et al., 2011). However, how does that work in the long run? Do entrepreneurial parents imprint entrepreneurship on an individual at an early age, conferring a cumulative advantage? Alternatively, parents who are entrepreneurs might simply be able to provide more resources, such as finance or networks, or might help throughout their offspring’s career, thus also providing instrumental support. A study of this kind may aim to detect some general patterns and may thus require sampling of a number of typical cases. Content analysis could be used, as this method would enable researchers to not only identify the ways in which parents affect entrepreneurship but also to examine the processes involved (Habersang et al., 2019).
Discussion

In the life course approach to entrepreneurship, we suggest studying autobiographies to learn more about the life course of entrepreneurs, and we discuss the merits and challenges of this approach. We argue that it can make several contributions to the literature.

First, analyzing autobiographies and life course dynamics helps to test and develop new theories (for example, Rauch et al., 2014). There have been repeated calls for new research in the domain of entrepreneurship to take a process view (Baron & Markman, 2004; Lévesque & Stephan, 2020). Life course data allows study of process theories that require long time frames. Moreover, our approach provides opportunities to test new moderators that have not been addressed in other primary research, such as specific historical and social experiences that vary over time. Moreover, such moderators define boundary conditions of theories in a field. Finally, if the evidence is gathered across different contexts, one can establish that the theory is applicable to many different settings (Hoon 2013).

Second, the findings from entrepreneurship need to be translated into actionable recommendations for further research and practice (Rauch et al., 2014). By providing evidence, studies are communicating to multiple audiences, including to practitioners. Practitioners need evidence from research that is inspired by what happens in practice. Research on life history dynamics provides ready-made case examples that provide quantitative findings (Crayne & Hunter, 2018, p. 25), which translate directly to practice. At the same time, our approach provides external validity of research findings and contributes to generalizability. This information is very important for researchers, particularly in fragmented fields such as entrepreneurship.
Thus, analyzing life histories of entrepreneurs can serve a variety of aims, ranging from describing phenomena to testing and building new theories. We have suggested analyzing autobiographies in particular, and our focus has been on the rigor required and the advantages and limitations of this approach. Future research needs to examine how to control bias and improve the rigor of analysis.

Several areas of the literature would likely benefit from analysis of the life course dynamics of entrepreneurs. This approach could also be used to examine and compare the life course of younger and more senior entrepreneurs, or to examine habitual or portfolio entrepreneurs or those considered destructive or delinquent. While we have focused on entrepreneurs, this approach can be readily extended to other areas of the management literature, such as the role of entrepreneurs in providing leadership, the evolution of businesses and the impact of entrepreneurs on society.

While our discussion has focused on the level of the individual, life history analysis can also be extended to the level of the firm or firm populations. For example, there is discussion in the entrepreneurship literature of whether the phenomenon of “born global” firms—firms that internationalize right after inception—is new or not, as today’s economy provides technological and institutional opportunities to do so. However, establishing whether this is a new phenomenon requires going back in time to analyze the internationalization strategies of firms in other centuries, and of course to examine the key role of founding CEOs in devising those strategies over time. There is growing momentum to study life history dynamics, as there are now much better tools, such as many types of text analysis and text mining software, to analyze the rich information available.

Conclusion
We suggest making more extensive use of a life history approach, based on the analysis of autobiographies, in the management and entrepreneurship literature. The approach has been used incidentally, but its potential has not yet been fully exploited. We argue that systematic study of life course dynamics allows researchers to address questions that cannot be easily addressed using other research methodologies. For example, autobiographies allow us to study the lives of extraordinary entrepreneurs, to analyse unique samples, to examine contextual factors, and to study long-term processes and effects. They can thus be used to develop and apply a life course theory of entrepreneurship (Karatas-Ozkan et al., 2014). They also provide evidence as it is contextualized and indicates what works for whom and under what circumstances. Autobiographies enable us to look at the entrepreneurial process from an insider’s point of view, giving us an understanding of the innermost thoughts and feelings of entrepreneurs and their relationships with those around them. In short, analysing autobiographies and synthesizing life course dynamics provides opportunities to understand phenomena of interest, for generalization or for theory testing or development. There are many autobiographies of entrepreneurs available, and a number of studies have analyzed some of them. However, there is methodological fragmentation and a lack of rigor in these studies. We provide some guiding principles on how to integrate autobiographies in future research designs. We hope our suggestions for using this methodology will encourage scholars to make greater use of autobiographies and enhance the relevance of entrepreneurship studies.
## Table 1

Different Approaches to Analysing Autobiographies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Meta ethnographic analysis</th>
<th>Critical narrative analysis</th>
<th>Historiometric analysis</th>
<th>Critical incidents</th>
<th>Systematic synthesis</th>
<th>Network analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Makes theory development possible by analyzing new phenomena.</td>
<td>Allows a holistic interpretation of life stories, and contributes to theory development.</td>
<td>Allows processes, unique samples, and contextual influences to be analyzed and information to be quantified.</td>
<td>Provides rich information that can be quantified. Relies on the participant’s perspective, and allows assessment of the context.</td>
<td>Provides relevant (for practice) and generalizable synthesis of existing research.</td>
<td>Allows analysis of cohorts of entrepreneurs and their interconnectedness through use of well-validated tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Has no guidelines on sampling, little standardization of the analysis, and replication is difficult.</td>
<td>Relies on the reviewer’s skills; no generalization possible.</td>
<td>Biases in the autobiography make generalizations difficult, problem of omitted variables.</td>
<td>Is difficult to define critical incidents and to determine generalizable inferential interpretations.</td>
<td>Depends on the reviewer’s skills, and often provides only descriptive frequency counts.</td>
<td>Does not provide a holistic account of the life course; uses proxy measures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.

Analyzing Autobiographies: Contribution and Illustration from Ideographic and Nomothetic Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Ideographic research</th>
<th>Consideration</th>
<th>Nomothetic research</th>
<th>Consideration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>How do entrepreneurs craft their life course and why?</td>
<td>The aim is relevant; life crafting has been neglected in entrepreneurship research.</td>
<td>How do parents and family influence the evolution of the company?</td>
<td>The aim is relevant. We know that family background influences entrepreneurship but not which parts of the entrepreneurial process are affected.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Three entrepreneurs: Richard Branson, Anita Roddick, and Yvon Chouinard</td>
<td>Purposive sampling: homogeneous sample</td>
<td>Data source: autobiographies</td>
<td>Supplementary sources: accounts from family members, newspapers, internet sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The three entrepreneurs are particularly relevant since they have described themselves as a sensation seeker, an environmental activist, and an adventurer</td>
<td></td>
<td>15 entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Purposive sampling: Since the aim is generalization, the subjects need to be representative of the period, location, and industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying and interpreting the common features or overarching metaphors in an autobiography and determining whether it is possible to compare and translate studies to each other</td>
<td>Meta-ethnographic analysis</td>
<td>Hypothesis testing</td>
<td>Content analysis and quantifying the information coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consistencies and inconsistencies were noted and used in the interpretation.</td>
<td>Internally reflexive audit trails used to demonstrate credibility, dependability, confirmability, and ecological validity; transferability, logical inference</td>
<td>Consistencies and inconsistencies were analyzed.</td>
<td>Validity assessed using supplementary sources, and checking intercoder reliability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


