

Soili PELTOLA^a, Kari Mikko VESALA^b
University of Helsinki, Finland

Constructing entrepreneurial orientation in a selling context: the qualitative attitude approach

Abstract: This paper explores the construction of attitudes in argumentative talk to underscore the context-specific nature of the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and their interrelations. The material comprises interviews in which the directors, who form the management group of a Finnish firm, individually commented on a statement that ‘each salesperson is an autonomous entrepreneur’. Our analysis identified two opposing evaluations of entrepreneurial autonomy, which were labeled as proactive selling and internal competitive aggressiveness. The analysis points out limitations on the realistic and positivist premises of the conventional EO measures by identifying related yet differing understandings which actors involved in everyday organizational practices display in their talk.

Keywords: rhetorical social psychology, qualitative attitude approach, entrepreneurial orientation, autonomy.

JEL codes: L21, L26, L29.

Introduction

Rhetorical approaches to organizational and management-related issues have become influential in recent years [Sillince & Suddaby 2008]. Rhetorical analyses have been combined with different organizational theories, and explicated the role of rhetoric in creating, maintaining, and challenging organizational order and practices [Engstrom 2010]. These studies consider rhetoric mainly as a persuasion and legitimation technique, the application of which may help organizations arrive at desired ends, such as maintaining stakeholder relations [Holt & Macpherson 2010],

^a Corresponding author, Department of Social Research, Unioninkatu 37, P. O. Box 54, 00014 Helsinki, Finland, e-mail: soili.peltola@helsinki.fi.

^b Department of Social Research, Unioninkatu 37, P. O. Box 54, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.

diffusing innovations [Green 2004], and establishing corporate control [Green, Babb & Alpaslan 2008].

Some scholars [e.g. Conrad & Malphurs 2008], however, claim that rhetoric should not be reduced to mere technique or style. Instead, rhetoric should be viewed, for example, as a practice of sense-making by which people arrive at a clear and reasonable understanding of alternate possibilities and their potential effects [Holt & Macpherson 2010]. The present paper contributes to this broader research agenda by taking a social psychological perspective to rhetoric in organizational contexts. More specifically, we apply this perspective to the theoretical concept of entrepreneurial orientation (EO), as rhetoric approaches have to date not been utilized in EO research.

Our approach draws on Billig's [1996] rhetorical social psychology, which emphasizes rhetoric as argumentation. Instead of focusing solely on social influence and persuasion, Billig considers rhetoric as the key to understanding the social nature of human thinking. He criticizes cognitive social psychology for focusing too emphatically on the consensual side of cognition, and for forgetting the argumentative and controversial aspect of thinking. Billig [1996, pp. 71–74] refers to Protagoras' maxim that "*it is always possible to mount an opposing case*" and that "*there are two sides to every question*". He suggests that the strategy of considering, searching for, and inventing not only arguments but also counter-arguments is basic to human cognitive processing. Internal cognitive structures (e.g. schemas or scripts) do not mechanically or straightforwardly dictate human conduct, because people are capable of deliberating and reflecting on alternate and competing viewpoints to solve problems, to make decisions, and to deal with social situations. Such capacity is essential in the social reality of everyday life where controversial issues frequently occur. Repeatedly, individuals face situations that demand decisions between alternate options, and therefore need to consider and evaluate also differing and opposing viewpoints.

Several institutions are also built on the management of controversies, for example, courtrooms, governmental strategies, political debates, and commercial bargaining. Further, many ideologies and ideological issues (e.g. the relation between freedom and equality), which people are forced to deal with, are inherently dilemmatic [see Billig 1991]. Organizations represent one important social context in which controversial issues can emerge and compete with each other. Therefore, it is feasible to study how these potentially controversial issues and their rhetorical management in everyday organizational situations are related to entrepreneurship.

Our study examines the rhetorical management of organizational issues through the concept of attitude. In rhetorical social psychology, an attitude is defined as an argumentative position in a controversy [Billig 1996]. An attitude consists of a stand that an individual takes for or against a particular issue, and those justifications that the individual gives to support the taken stand. An attitude toward a particular is-

sue seldom translates into one completely fixed position that applies unchangeably across different situations. Instead, an attitude can frequently include different positions that emerge in different contexts. Therefore, attitudes are contextually flexible. The first step for organizations to manage and make sense of any entrepreneurship-related issue is to understand what the multiple viewpoints towards it actually are, and how organizational members justify these views for themselves and for the entire organization.

Our paper introduces the qualitative attitude approach [Vesala & Rantanen 2007] as a potential method for studying entrepreneurship in organizations. The qualitative attitude approach is based on Billig's [1996] rhetorical social psychology, as mentioned above. The approach has previously been utilized to examine evaluation in social interaction [Pyysiainen 2010; Pyysiainen & Vesala 2013] and the construction of various objects of evaluation, for example, close customer relations [Vesala & Peura 2007], alternative food systems [Nousiainen et al. 2009], and animal welfare [Kauppinen et al. 2010]. In this study we analyze a salesperson's entrepreneurial autonomy as an object of evaluation for members of a management team. To demonstrate the relevance of our analysis to entrepreneurship research, we connect the results with the discussion on the theoretical concept of entrepreneurial orientation [Lumpkin & Dess 1996; Covin & Slevin 1989] and its autonomy dimension. Our primary aim is to show how the qualitative attitude approach is applied in practice when studying the rhetorical construction of entrepreneurship-related attitudes within organizations.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, we briefly review social psychological attitude research, and explicate the premises of the qualitative attitude approach. Second, the methodological section explains the interview design and the principles of analysis. Next, we introduce our practical application example, namely EO and the nature of its autonomy dimension together with the empirical research material. Thereafter, we present the classifying and interpretative analysis of the generated material. Finally, the last section provides a discussion of the relevance of the qualitative attitude approach to entrepreneurship research in organizational contexts. We further discuss EO in the light of these findings and provide potential avenues for future applications of the qualitative attitude approach in EO research.

1. Qualitative attitude approach: the rhetorical construction of attitudes

The mainstream social psychological research conceptualizes an attitude predominantly as an internal disposition to respond to an object of evaluation in a particular manner, either favorably or unfavorably [e.g. McGuire 1985; Eagly & Chaiken

1993]. These internal dispositions are assumed to influence overt behavior regardless of context and consistently over time. The dispositional attitude conceptualization has been criticized on several grounds [Augoustinos & Walker 1995, Billig 1996; Lalljee, Brown & Ginsburg 1984; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Vesala & Rantanen 2007]. For instance, the non-contextual conceptualization of attitudes is considered to lead to simplified and empirically untenable hypotheses about the connection between attitudes and overt behavior. Furthermore, the dispositional view seems not to be able to account for the variety of attitude expressions in everyday talk and conversation. Taking language merely as a means for reporting the inner dispositions, it fails to address the question what individuals actually do when they express their opinions.

Consequently, attitudes have also been conceptualized as evaluative practices [e.g. Potter 1998; Lalljee, Brown & Ginsburg 1984]. According to this conceptualization, situational variability (and not long-term consistency) of attitudes is to be expected, because individuals often take a pragmatic view on attitudes: they are not confined to any single pre-determined attitude but rather they adjust their attitude expressions according to situation. Individuals may thus express their opinions in a specific manner that suits what they try to accomplish with their talk in each particular occasion. The pragmatic function of attitudes for individuals is realized in social situations. Attitude research should therefore explicate the nature of evaluative practices across different contexts.

In rhetorical social psychology [Billig 1996; 1991], the concept of attitude, as any other key concept of social psychology, is interpreted in terms of rhetoric. The rhetorical approach to attitudes emphasizes the argumentative nature of social reality in which people construct, deliberate, and express different stands and opinions. The practice of rhetoric organizes interaction and is spread throughout social life. In social interaction attitudes are always present in that people express their views on different questions, argue for their own views, and reject those of others, especially on controversial issues which require stand-taking. Even the holders of strong views usually display a variety of positions instead of expressing only one fixed view. Attitudes have both an individual and a social meaning: an expression of an attitude manifests something personal about the opinion-holder and places this individual in a wider context of the particular controversial issue at hand. Any attitude is therefore more than an expression in favor of or against a position: it is also implicitly or explicitly an argument against a counter-position.

The rhetorical meaning and construction of attitudes can be identified in argumentation. According to Billig [1991; 2009], the identification and the study of rhetorical meaning do not require a specific methodology, because a single methodological toolbox would restrict the analysis of argumentation patterns. Thus, the formal procedures of an analysis may vary even though the theoretical principles of the rhetoric approach to attitudes remain constant. In this paper we utilize the

qualitative attitude approach [Vesala & Rantanen 2007], which combines Billig's rhetorical view and a specific empirical procedure for generating and analyzing argumentative talk.

In the qualitative attitude approach [Vesala & Rantanen 2007] an attitude is studied as a communicative and evaluative viewpoint, either positive or negative, to a particular issue in a particular social context. When taking a stand, an individual usually justifies the stand and accounts for it, also when the stand is presented conditionally or with reservations. In such argumentative rhetoric, pre-given objects of evaluation do not remain fixed and unambiguous. As Asch noticed already in 1940, positive and negative evaluations of an object are typically associated with qualitatively different representations of the given object. Analogically, when justifying their stands, people frame and reframe the issue they are taking a stand to. Furthermore, the construction of dimensions and subjects of evaluation (e.g. the identity and role of the evaluator) can be viewed as rhetorical processes. The qualitative attitude approach aims to provide a systematic procedure to study the construction of attitudes in evaluative argumentative talk empirically.

2. Qualitative attitude approach: methodological procedures

2.1. Interview design

The empirical research material in the qualitative attitude approach is typically generated in individual or group interview settings. The approach involves a particular practice for conducting interviews in order to produce and stimulate free and multifaceted argumentative talk [Vesala 2008]. The idea is to create comparability between individual interviews by a semi-structured interview design, which organizes the interview into distinct sections. Each section involves a conversation which begins with an introduction of a given attitude statement presented uniformly in each interview. Attitude statements, similar to those in quantitative attitude measures, are used as prompts to produce a rich and open-ended argumentation about a particular issue [Vesala 2008].

In the process of interviews the interviewer has to accomplish two tasks: to elicit the interviewees' opinion about each attitude statement, and to promote commenting while remaining neutral toward the issue at hand [Vesala 2008]. The interviewees, in their own words, take a stand on each statement and justify their stands. The qualitative attitude approach requires the interviewer not to define the concepts and ideas included in the statements, but, instead, it lets the interviewees define them.

Even though exact (theoretically motivated) wordings are used to formulate the statements, the interviewees are free to contest them and their relevance in each specific research context.

Congruently, in each interview, the interviewer introduces the prompt statements one by one by reading them aloud, and also presents them in a written form on a sheet of paper. The interviewer can elicit clarifications from the interviewees by asking them to describe more deeply how an argument would present itself in practice. Further, the interviewees can be offered recapitulations of their previous views in order to encourage more profound reflections on the statement or to ensure a valid understanding of given views.

2.2. Principles of analysis

The analysis in the qualitative attitude approach proceeds from details of the material to outlining general patterns of argumentation [Vesala & Rantanen 2007]. The analysis is usually performed in two stages. First, in the *classifying* analysis, the argumentative talk is categorized according to a literal reading of the research material. Second, the *interpretative* analysis brings these categories into a conceptual dialogue with theoretical concepts and discussions relevant to the particular study at hand.

The classifying analysis aims to identify different explicit stands taken towards each attitude statement together with specific arguments intended to reason and justify these stands [Vesala & Rantanen 2007]. The analysis also details stand-taking that participants express in a reserved, conditional, or hesitant manner [see also Billig 1996]. At this stage of the analysis, individual interviewees are not the primary analytical units. Different types of stands or justifications can therefore be identified also within one and the same interview. The different stands are then classified into categories: first, according to the type of stand, and, thereafter, on the basis of what type of justifications were presented for each stand. As a result, an overall view of multiple stand-justification combinations observable in the material can be obtained. In addition, comparisons between different interviews or groups of interviews may be made with the help of the categories.

The interpretative analysis elaborates on the initial classificatory analysis [Vesala & Rantanen 2007]. It aims to identify general patterns of argumentation evident among the detailed categories of stands and justifications. These patterns can be articulated as qualitatively different attitudes which can be linked to chosen theoretical concepts and discussions. The interpretative analysis can further include an explication of possible functions and rhetorical resources of the evaluative argumentation. For instance, the analysis can, at this level, focus on the self-expressive and interpersonal functions of attitudes, or on the beliefs, values, and experiences that are utilized to justify or construct a particular stand or attitude.

3. Empirical setting for approaching the concept of entrepreneurial orientation

This section presents the setting of an empirical study that we employ as an application example of the qualitative attitude approach. The study deals with the construct of entrepreneurial orientation, and focuses on its autonomy dimension. Our qualitative approach represents a distinctly dissimilar methodology than what has hitherto been applied in EO research.

3.1. The autonomy dimension in the concept of EO

In recent decades, EO has received substantial theoretical and empirical attention as a potential means for existing firms to ensure their position, growth, and economic performance, especially in increasingly competitive business environments [Rauch et al. 2009]. The concept of EO constructs entrepreneurship as a firm-level phenomenon. Entrepreneurship is viewed not as an attitude or a characteristic of individual employees or managers, but as something connected with a firm's strategy-making orientation and thus encompassing the entire firm [Dess, Lumpkin & Covin 1997; Lechner & Gudmundsson 2012; Gawel 2012].

EO describes firm-level entrepreneurship by foregrounding five specific dimensions. These five key dimensions include innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, autonomy, and competitive aggressiveness [Lumpkin & Dess 1996; Covin & Slevin 1989; Miller 1983]. Most empirical studies treat them as one dimension when defining whether a firm can be described as entrepreneurial [Basso, Fayolle & Bouchard 2009; Covin & Wales 2012]. The concept of EO claims that entrepreneurial firms innovate and experiment with new products, services, and processes; proactively anticipate future demand and seize market opportunities; aggressively compete with their industry rivals; take bold risks in the face of unknown opportunities; support independent initiatives of individual employees [Covin & Slevin 1989; 1991; Lumpkin & Dess 1996, 2001].

Lumpkin and Dess [1996] define autonomy in the concept of EO as an independent action of an individual or team in bringing forth an opportunity, and carrying it through to completion. Thus, unlike other EO dimensions, autonomy functions primarily on an individual or micro-level, and its role is to set in motion, and prime the other dimensions. A recently developed autonomy measure [Lumpkin, Cogliser & Schneider 2009] conceptually differentiates EO-related autonomy more distinctly from management-related autonomy, such as autonomy induced by decentralization or other structural arrangements. A firm should support the efforts of independently working individuals and teams that make decisions on their own about what business opportunities to pursue, regardless of organizational constraints.

These initiatives and input should play a major role when the firm identifies and selects suitable opportunities in the marketplace.

To date, EO research has kept to one methodological tradition. The theoretical EO formulations have largely taken place within a positivist and realistic quantitative research paradigm [Rauch et al. 2009; Covin & Wales 2012; see also Anderson & Starnawska 2008; Grant & Perren 2002; Lindgren & Packendorff 2009]. This paradigm considers EO an abstract characteristic; it cannot be defined as a separate, clearly observable entity, but is instead inferred from the EO attitude measure that seeks indications of entrepreneurial activities within the organization [Covin & Lumpkin 2011].

However, from the perspective of the rhetorical construction of attitudes [Billig, 1996], EO and its dimensions can be evaluated and reacted to differently across different organizational members and contexts [Miller 2011; Wales, Monsen & McKelvie 2011]. Therefore, the dimensions of EO are not absolute, as their meaning and usage can vary according to organizational members and contexts. This qualitative variation of attitudes can positively contribute to the theoretical discussion of EO. For example, even though the concept of EO presumes all dimensions to add equally to the overall quantitative level of EO in any given firm, the exact nature of the relations between the five dimensions of EO remains an unresolved issue [Wales, Gupta & Mousa 2011].

3.2. Empirical research material

The empirical research material of this study consists of interviews with six directors who form the management group of a small, privately-owned Finnish enterprise. The case firm offers consultative business management services to other organizations. According to the managing director, the firm's financial position was very good at the time when the interviews took place, and its workload in previous months had been tremendous.

In the practices informed by the concept of EO, a firm's EO has traditionally been examined from the perspective of its managing director [Wiklund & Shepherd 2003]. The senior-most executive is assumed to possess the most relevant information on an organization to provide a firm-level viewpoint of its entrepreneurial actions [Lyon, Lumpkin & Dess 2000]. Instead of relying on only one key informant, this study introduces a wider organizational perspective to EO by drawing on the talk of the entire management group of the case firm.

The empirical context of this study is business-to-business selling. Selling can be considered relevant to EO as firms normally realize their economic outcomes through sales activities. In fact, survey research on EO most often operationalizes economic performance as sales growth, and views growth in other dimensions as a result of increased sales [Wiklund 1999; Wales, Gupta & Mousa 2011]. The sales

function of the case firm was organized mainly around face-to-face meetings with representatives of their client organizations. The position of the directors was equal as far as selling was concerned, because all of them also served as salespersons and had personal client-related sales responsibilities to attend to. Therefore, they all occupied a dual position in that they, on the one hand, served as directors responsible for the entire firm and, on the other hand, as salespeople with individual sales obligations.

The directors were interviewed individually in May 2008. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and recorded for later transcription with the permission of the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. All the excerpts presented in this paper are translations of the original interview talk. The translations aim to maintain a clear sense of the Finnish original. In the excerpts the interviewees are identified by codes M1–M6.

3.3. Formulation of the attitude statement

In this study, we are interested in the evaluation of the autonomy of a salesperson. The management group members commented on the statement that *'each salesperson is an autonomous entrepreneur'*. This particular statement introduced one of the central ideas of the concept of EO to the interviewees by linking the words *autonomy* and *entrepreneurship* to the selling activities that take place within the case firm and its management group. However, the formulation does not directly suggest that a salesperson's autonomy can also be viewed as an organizational characteristic, as one would expect within the concept of EO. In this interview setting it remained to be seen whether the interviewees themselves would take up such rhetoric.

The study deals with autonomy as it was perceived and treated in the management group members' rhetoric. We do not examine individual-level autonomy as such, but consider salespeople's autonomy and its consequences as a phenomenon manifested in the management group members' talk.

4. Classifying analysis: conditional, supporting, and rejecting argumentation

This section presents the qualitative variation in stand-taking and argumentation. The analysis is based on the comments by all the interviewees. First, their immediate responses to the attitude statement are described. Second, the analysis shows what kind of stands the management group members took either in support of or against the statement, and how they justified these stands.

4.1. First reactions: Conditional argumentation

Overall, the most striking observation that emerged during the literal reading of our material was the instant conditional stand that four of the interviewees took in favour of the statement (i.e. each salesperson is an autonomous entrepreneur) directly after the interviewer had presented it to them. In the words of one of the directors:

Yes, in a way; well at least spirit-. Well, so yes and no, yes and no, yeah. (M6)

The “yes and no” formulation clearly indicates that the interviewee can accept the statement, but only partly. Another director’s immediate comment on the statement explains the conditional view more in detail:

Yeah, I would say that, quite comprehensively, it is correct, but there is also another side to that issue. If one thinks about this type of typical consultative role, I suppose that one goes more and more, and we have also gone, quite far in doing it also together. (M2)

According to interviewee M2, selling has two sides: autonomous action and collaboration. Pursuing sales opportunities together can be interpreted as emphasizing the meaning of internal relationships between different salespeople in the case firm. A third example of an immediate conditional stand highlights the business-to-business selling context more specifically:

My opinion is that it depends on the sales scope, what kind of sales it is about, what kind of business line. (M4)

The explanation focused on the kind of selling one discusses, and the kind of business area in which the firm acts. Independent action does not fit all lines of business or all types of sales items. An additional explanation was that autonomous action does not suit all clients either.

The collaborative side of selling was also the reason why two directors quite strongly rejected the statement at the beginning, as the following excerpt shows:

Well, literally speaking, I guess each salesperson is not an autonomous entrepreneur; after all, there are a lot of entrepreneurial characteristics in selling as such but depending, of course, a little on what one is selling and to whom. Often, selling is nevertheless collaboration. (M5)

It is worth noting, however, that the two management group members who initially opposed the statement did mention the importance of being autonomous in one’s selling pursuits soon after explaining the need for collaboration. Their argumentation pattern is thus similarly two-sided, as was that of the other directors’ who began their stand in a conditional manner.

In sum, their initial stands either conditionally supported or rejected the statement. In this conditional evaluation, the interviewees offered approving arguments alongside opposite counter-arguments. When further elaborating their initial stands,

all six interviewees finally presented and considered both supporting and rejecting arguments regarding the statement of a salesperson as an autonomous entrepreneur.

4.2. Supporting arguments

All interviewees presented at least one supportive argument. The justifications for positive stands can be organized into four categories. The first category lays out a general principle of autonomous spirit in selling:

Good sales work also requires very many of the characteristics of an independent entrepreneur. Let's say that selling cannot only be directed somewhere from above, like "Hey! Go there, do that", but also requires an awful lot of one's own thinking and an awful lot of one's own actions. In this firm, for example, we have one principle according to which nobody owns a single client and anyone can go anywhere. (M2)

The interviewee states that the qualities of an independent entrepreneur are indeed essential for successful selling activities. The firm's basic guideline allows each salesperson to freely pursue any sales opportunity one is inclined to pursue. Actually, being in need of explicit directions from supervisors would eventually be interpreted as a sign of incompetence, even though some principles "from above" might exist in actual practice, such as in the form of personal sales budgets. The arguments of M2 can be interpreted as being in accordance with Lumpkin and Dess's [1996] definition of autonomy as well as that of the recent entrepreneurial autonomy measure [Lumpkin, Cogliser & Schneider 2009].

The second category emphasizes each salesperson's personal responsibilities: So yes, in the sense that a salesperson always, when selling, has his own profit responsibility, and the objectives and the budget he must meet; and, anyway, he is responsible for reaching them in one way or the other. (M6)

The interviewees often employed this argument when arguing in favor of the statement. As far as selling is concerned, all the salespeople share the same responsibility of reaching the goal that has been set to them individually. Objectives are clearly defined, although who set them remained unclear. Furthermore, the interviewees stressed that the responsibility for reaching those objectives cannot be delegated to others. The direction is unambiguous, but the means can be freely chosen.

Third, the interviewees pointed out the importance of "intense activeness", "determination", and "establishing one's own contacts" when pursuing their personal sales budgets. Independent salespeople must also take the initiative in order for the selling to succeed:

Of course, one must be independent in the sense that one has the courage to take the initiative and make uncompeled solutions, suggestions, decisions, and situation analyses to back up sales. (M5)

This comment indicates that selling requires thorough preliminary work on possible solutions and situational contexts. More specifically, the comment emphasizes the analysis and decision-making skills of salespeople as well as one important personal characteristic, the courage. Selling is not meant for people who fail to take the initiative.

Fourth, salespeople must also build trust among clients:

It [the statement] is correct in the sense that selling quite essentially includes the intention to build trust and actually building it, and I would say that I quite comprehensively think that selling trust and one's own person, selling collaboration with the client, are an essential part of selling, so I am in a way selling myself to the client. (M5)

Autonomous salespeople must also place their personalities on the line, and independently build a relationship with the client. A compatibility of personalities between salespeople and clients enhances trust among clients as well as a willingness to collaborate with the salesperson. Trust and collaboration do not exist on their own but need to be actively constructed as essential elements of selling. On a more general level, interviewee M5 implicitly indicates how client relationships are formed in business-to-business contexts. The first step involves selling the salesperson's personality, which, in turn, creates trust among clients. Only then can the salesperson proceed with the actual selling of the business services the firm has to offer.

The supporting arguments represent, as one interviewee put it, different aspects of an "entrepreneurial spirit". They also bring to the fore the meaning of external client relationships. The positive aspects of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling fit the requirements of how client relationships should be handled in the case firm. Self-directed action is at the core of successful selling. In the eyes of both individual salespeople and the firm, those trustworthy salespeople who carry different sales opportunities through to completion can produce results. If the salesperson is passive and unresourceful, neither the salesperson nor the firm will reach their turnover or sales budget objectives.

4.3. Rejecting arguments

The rejecting arguments can be categorized into four classes. The first category underscores internal competition, of which interviewee M1 presented the most critical account:

This idea of an autonomous entrepreneur, well, it creates quite a lot of internal competition, which, in my opinion, is not such a good way to encourage people inside a firm. The departure point, in my opinion, is a little bit negative: everybody is pursuing their own benefits. This idea is something that has

also reared its head to a greater extent in this firm. Sometimes, when one has established a contact somewhere, one cannot be quite certain that someone else does not then push in to sell and get the client for himself. If everyone is an autonomous entrepreneur, it means that all are, in a way, competitors even inside the same firm. (M1)

The interviewee indicated that if a firm chooses to encourage salespeople towards autonomous action, it can result in internal competition. The entrepreneurial spirit of independent actors is present, but has unfortunate consequences because everybody is allowed to disregard the opportunity pursuit of one's colleagues. Interviewee M1 emphasized this stand by stating that such internal competition actually occurred in the case firm when a salesperson invaded somebody else's sales territory. Personal goals drive selling, and colleagues fail to respect mutual working relationships.

The second category of rejecting arguments stresses collegial interdependence and teamwork:

If one is conducting sales that depend on the contribution of several people, one must, of course, also take those other persons' how should I put it, strengths and perspectives into account. (M5)

Interviewee M5 indicates that individual salespersons depend on others because they may not possess all the required expertise to carry through complex client projects. Instead of autonomy, collaboration is supported, because it involves utilizing colleagues' strengths and insights to fulfil more complicated client needs. Furthermore, as one interviewee noted, even though certain responsibilities of extensive projects can be turned over to colleagues, the salespersons still maintain their leading role in pursuing the sales opportunity in question. This relaxes the need to be overly autonomous in every aspect.

The third class of rejecting arguments highlights what can occur if a short-term selling perspective is very strongly emphasized. This is evident in the following excerpt:

Well, the entrepreneurial attitude means that you start with the fact that you have to get butter on your bread in any case, and, in a certain way, one probably has to look at it from two perspectives: that one really gets what one wants, but that one cannot always maximize profits, because one must start from the fact that one has to be able to earn one's bread on the longest possible term with the client. One cannot stain one's reputation. (M4)

In trying to reach their individual sales goals, salespeople sometimes tend to maximize their short-term economic outcomes instead of pursuing a long-term client relationship. This can deteriorate their image in the eyes of their clients. Salespeople must balance their own individual needs with those of their clients in order to create a trustworthy and successful long-term relationship. On a more general level, sell-

ing seems to be the core function of client relationships, and can potentially harm them if handled unilaterally. Client needs, more than the economic objectives of individual salespeople, should thus be the main driving force of these relationships.

Interactive situations with the client raise a potential problem that the firm must solve and which represents the fourth justification category:

On the other hand, when meeting the client, we like to go with someone together because this business is often quite chemistry-dependent; the risk decreases when we are two, so if with the first person the client feels that, “Hey, we are not quite finding a common feeling”, then he might find it with the other one. (M3)

Selling requires teamwork and collaboration because not all clients accept the salesperson the firm has assigned to them. The strongest reason in favor of being alert to “interpersonal chemistry” issues seems to be the fact that clients do not buy from people they do not like. Incompatible personalities represent another clear risk to building trustworthy client relationship, so it is wise to introduce several salespeople to clients to ensure that they like at least one of them. All salespeople should thus be willing to hand over their client to another autonomous salesperson whose chemistry suits better that of the client’s. In the selling context, independent action should be regarded as a way to serve the cultivation of profitable, long-term client relationships rather than treated as an absolute value as such.

The rejecting arguments represent, as one interviewee suggested, the actions of “lone wolfs”. They also bring the firm’s internal relationships as integral part of external client relationships to the fore. If salespeople choose to behave overly independently, they actually undermine collaboration and hinder the exploration and development of clients’ needs for which their colleagues are responsible. Such salespeople not only fail to help their colleagues, but also end up being less effective in their own sales efforts, since the expertise of other is no longer at their disposal. The most critical arguments illustrate that individual salespersons can even engage in bitter competition for clients as well as sales opportunities. This has unfortunate consequences both for client firms and within the organization.

5. Interpretative analysis: two attitudes towards an autonomous entrepreneur in selling

Generally, the interviewees effortlessly and thoroughly commented on the attitude statement of an autonomous entrepreneur, and applied entrepreneurship-related vocabulary in their talk. They treated autonomy, above all, as an individual characteristic, and described it, for example, as an entrepreneurial spirit, attitude, and

characteristic. Therefore, they seemed to be familiar with the phenomenon of entrepreneurship and possess distinct representations of it.

However, the interviewees presented qualitatively different accounts when taking a stand towards the statement. Even though entrepreneurship is theoretically regarded as a positive orientation that supports growth and profitability [e.g. Rauch et al. 2009], the interviewees in this study regarded it as something more. They enumerated both positive and negative aspects and consequences of entrepreneurial autonomy, and their talk depicted two different perspectives on the statement. These perspectives can be interpreted as two opposing argumentative patterns, or attitudes, in which the statement was treated; these two patterns led to the consequent construction of autonomy in two dissimilar ways. These two patterns can be further interpreted to be congruent with and linked to the dimensions of proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness in the concept of EO. A summary of the two identified attitudes is presented in the following table.

Two attitudes towards an autonomous entrepreneur in selling

Evaluation	Argumentation pattern	Target	Justification
Positive	proactive selling	organization	independency
			ability to fulfill personal responsibilities
		external relationships	initiative-taking
			trust-building
Negative	internal competitive aggressiveness	internal relationships	internal competition
			interdependency
		external relationships	short-term sales maximization
			matching personalities

In the business-to-business selling context of this study, the *positive* version of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling can be interpreted as *proactive selling*. The interviewees constructed it by way of their external client relationships and their personal obligations towards the entire organization. Theoretically, EO measures [Covin & Slevin 1989; Lumpkin & Dess 2001] operationalize proactiveness as anticipating opportunities and being ahead of competitors. In this study, proactiveness represented an encompassing way to nurture long-term client relationships in which individual salespeople give priority to client needs over their own. Selling was described as a process in which a thorough examination and development of relevant selling opportunities precede and anticipate the actual selling situation with

the client. This seemed to be the most advantageous stage to apply the expertise of colleagues too. The entire selling process should ideally be led by one self-directed and active salesperson who has earned the trust of the client. Proactiveness in selling displaces autonomous and short-term sales maximizing activities in favor of external client relationships, and uses internal working relationships to anticipate sales opportunities within client relationships to reach overall firm goals. This, however, does not indicate that individual objectives are unimportant, but rather that they should not endanger the process of proactively attending to client relationships.

The *negative* version of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling may be interpreted as *internal competitive aggressiveness*. The interviewees constructed it by way of their internal relationships that can, if non-existent or poor, harm external relationships. Theoretically, in the concept of EO, competitive aggressiveness is targeted at competitors in the marketplace [Miller 1983]. In this study, however, as far as selling was concerned, the target was also within the firm. One's own colleagues may represent a threat to the fulfillment of one's own sales budget which can lead to disregarding the opportunity pursuit of others. Internal competitive aggressiveness takes two forms. In the stronger form, salespeople steal clients from each other by directing their sales opportunity pursuit towards those colleagues who have already executed a preliminary opportunity assessment. From an individual salesperson's viewpoint this can be a much easier way to identify opportunities than a more tedious search among clients in the marketplace. The milder form of internal competition represents an absence of collaboration among colleagues. If salespeople refuse to share their knowledge and experience with each other, they may put their client relationships at risk, because opportunities may go unnoticed or underexplored. As a result, the firm fails to fully meet its clients' needs and overall performance objectives.

Every member of the management group of the case firm expressed and utilized both attitudes in their talk. The conditional argumentation described earlier can be understood as a rhetorical device intended to manage the two opposing patterns of argumentation. Thus, notwithstanding the individual differences in the tone of argumentation, a considerable consensus and shared understanding of the nature and relevance of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling seemed to prevail within the management group.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to introduce the qualitative attitude approach as a potential method for entrepreneurship research. The concept of entrepreneurial orientation was utilized as an example to demonstrate the relevance of the approach to entrepreneurship research in organizational contexts.

The qualitative attitude approach simulated well the problem-oriented and controversial nature of entrepreneurship-related issues. The classifying and interpretative analyses illustrated how two opposing attitudes towards the idea of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling were rhetorically constructed in interview interaction. All management group members presented both positive and negative views towards the statement, and thus possessed the ability to position themselves to the issue in these qualitatively dissimilar manners.

Consequently, the interviewees placed the object of evaluation in two different contexts and constructed two attitudes towards the object. Just as Asch's [1940] research participants interpreted 'politician' either as a respected statesperson or a corrupted individual, the management group members evaluated the idea of an autonomous entrepreneur in selling as an active relationship promoter or a self-serving lone wolf. These evaluations represent such distinct opinions that they could even be linked to two separate EO dimensions.

Conditional argumentation appeared extensively in the empirical material. The reserved argumentation in initial stand-taking can be interpreted to illustrate the flexibility of attitudes in two respects. First, once a person is capable of constructing more than one view to the same object of evaluation, the argumentation may become conditional, reserved, or hesitant. In this study the conditional argumentation functioned as a rhetorical resource to manage the two opposing and conflicting evaluations. Second, the reserved argumentation in initial stand-taking can be interpreted in terms of "*latitude of acceptance*" [Billig 1996, pp. 256–263]. In the conditional argumentation a person does not immediately take a too definite stand towards an issue. This latitude allows the person to adjust the stand later on according to how the situation evolves. In the interview interaction itself conditional argumentation may also serve as a rhetorical resource to ensure a thorough evaluation of the prompt statement before a more definite stand or a more comprehensive view towards the issue may be reached.

Methodologically, the relevance of the qualitative attitude approach stems from the nature of argumentation it stimulates. In the same interview the interviewee can construct different opinions on a single statement. In other words, the immediate commenting on the same statement produces different attitudes. This special feature of the method demonstrates how the same object of evaluation (in this case, an autonomous entrepreneur in selling) can be constructed in various ways. This feature of the qualitative attitude approach contrasts, for example, with many discursive approaches in which several discourses (interpretative repertoires) are identified in the research material according to their meaning rather than their position in conversational sequence. For example, in the study by Lähdesmäki and Siltaoja [2010] four evaluative constructions of reputation were identified, but they were each produced as responses to different issues and in different entry points within the interviews.

From the perspective of EO, the two opposing attitudes offered a wider view to the context of both selling and EO. Compared to the quantitative methodology conventionally utilized in the EO research, the two constructed attitudes highlight the contextual nature of the EO and the interrelations between its dimensions. Next, we will discuss the relevance of these results' to the theoretical concept of EO.

In the management group members' argumentation, autonomy was evaluated both as a positive and a negative phenomenon. This result is unsurprising, because EO research has already raised some questions about the potential negative effects of individual EO dimensions. For example, some researchers have claimed that autonomy carried to extremes may actually diminish a firm's returns [Lumpkin, Cogliser & Schneider 2009]. The point of our study, however, is to highlight the fact that autonomy was evaluated negatively when it was connected to another EO dimension (competitive aggressiveness) and treated as a particular type of firm-level issue. Contrary to what the concept of EO suggests, the amount of autonomy as such did not appear to be a key question.

Autonomy was further constructed as a firm-level phenomenon through proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness. Even though the prompt statement presented autonomy as an individual-level issue, the interviewees also considered the issue of autonomy in relation to the salesperson's co-workers, clients, and the entire firm. According to the management group members' argumentation, autonomous actions ought to be organized to serve the firm's overall objectives. In the larger context of EO as a firm-level strategy-making process, it is paramount that individual actions be constructed as a firm-level issue. The simultaneous presence of the two opposing attitudes suggests how firms may reach a positive competitive status in the market but also how they can jeopardize their position and weaken their overall results. Awareness of both attitudes may provide firms with better tools to manage their entrepreneurial activities, compared to a situation in which the downside of autonomous actions fails to emerge.

In our research material, autonomy failed to connect to the other two of the EO dimensions, namely innovativeness and risk-taking. This would have been possible, in principle at least, because of the open-ended interview design, as the realized linking with proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness attests. Innovativeness and risk-taking were not explicitly present in the interviewees' argumentation, although the rhetoric of internal competitive aggressiveness could be interpreted to reflect a risk management perspective. The link between autonomy and innovativeness was completely absent. This could point to the possibility that, in the case firm, innovativeness was treated as a separate phenomenon not directly linked to selling. The discussions, know-how or processes of innovativeness may, of course, still have been executed elsewhere in a manner quite unconnected to selling, such as in separate strategic or research and development meetings. In any event, the absence of innovativeness is extraordinary in that the outcomes of innovativeness process-

es, namely new products or services, could generally be considered essential to the selling function. This observation raises an intriguing question about the conceptual nature of autonomy in the EO: does any form of autonomy contribute to the level of EO even if unconnected to innovativeness or the processes of generating innovations? Or is it specifically the innovativeness-enhancing type of autonomy that should be considered relevant in the case of EO?

In sum, the application of the qualitative attitude approach to the study of the autonomy dimension of EO has pointed out limitations in the realistic and positivist premises of EO. The dimensions of EO do not automatically emerge or link to each other and their evaluations may vary by organizational contexts. In such situations, what is fundamental to the EO and how one should interpret the EO level of a firm remains unclear. Therefore, identifying the EO within organizational practices seems not to be as straightforward and mechanical a task as the theoretical literature suggests.

As with any study, the present findings are subject to certain limitations. Because the findings rely on the argumentation of six management group members in one case firm, they cannot offer an exhaustive description of attitudes that management groups in other organizations might express. The findings cannot be generalized in this way. Rather, the findings from the case firm demonstrate a *possibility* which may be relevant also for other business service organizations with similar interaction-based selling activities. Hence, the findings offer empirically valid views into the theoretical concept of EO [see Miller 2011]. The generalizability of possibilities is a view that social scientists generally adopt to explain the validity of qualitative research in social interaction [Peräkylä 2004].

In conclusion, the qualitative attitude approach offers methodological tools to examine complex entrepreneurship-related issues in different social contexts and from multiple internal and external perspectives. The organized access to the variation in attitudes in organizational rhetoric can be utilized to contest traditional and taken-for-granted theoretical understandings of entrepreneurial orientation. Future studies could apply the qualitative attitude approach to clarify the context-specific nature of EO and the contextual relationships between the EO dimensions. These new research avenues could, for instance, offer critical contributions to the future development of EO measures. In fact, Covin and Wales [2012] claim that practically no progress was made in the development of EO assessment during the past decade. Finally, the qualitative attitude approach benefits organizations in producing more encompassing insights into practical phenomena in their everyday reality.

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