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### Building a Conceptual Framework of Entrepreneurial Competencies: The Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological View

Aurik Gustomo, Sri Herliana<sup>1</sup>, Wawan Dhewanto<sup>1</sup> and Astri Ghina<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Business and Management (SBM), Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: [aurik@sbm-itb.ac.id](mailto:aurik@sbm-itb.ac.id); [sri.herliana@sbm-itb.ac.id](mailto:sri.herliana@sbm-itb.ac.id); [w\\_dhewanto@sbm-itb.ac.id](mailto:w_dhewanto@sbm-itb.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Economics and Business, Telkom University, Indonesia, E-mail: [aghina@telkomuniversity.ac.id](mailto:aghina@telkomuniversity.ac.id)

**Abstract:** The importance of entrepreneurial competencies that positively impact on business performance and growth has been widely recognized. The concept of such aptitudes has been widely used by academics and practitioners in their drive for enhanced business performance. However, the conceptualization of entrepreneurial competencies, its conceptual framework, system of measurement and relationship to business performance all require more extensive exploration. This investigation thus proposes a form of conceptual framework-building for entrepreneurial competencies as the preliminary stage to the further development of research and practice.

**Keywords:** competencies; entrepreneurial competencies; business performance; conceptual framework.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is a key issue in developing countries where more than 50% of people consider setting up a commercial enterprise to represent a desirable career choice. For example, the percentage of individuals in various South East Asian nations who regard starting a business as such is as follows; the Philippines 82%, Thailand 74%, Indonesia 73%, Vietnam 67%, Singapore 52%, and Malaysia 50%. The statistics for those who agree that successful entrepreneurs enjoy high status comprise; the Philippines 78%, Indonesia 78%, Vietnam 76%, Thailand 71%, Singapore 63%, and Malaysia 50% (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2013).

There is widespread acknowledgement that competencies influence the business performance of SMEs (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013). Several studies focusing on Entrepreneurial Competencies (EC) were conducted as a means of supporting SMEs to become successful enterprises. Despite ECs being regarded as a vital aspect of business performance, according to Brinckmann (2008) the study of entrepreneurial competencies contained in previous literatures is still in its preliminary phase.

Mitchelmore & Rowley (2013) reported the competencies of entrepreneurs. Continuing this study, they identified those competencies that SME owners perceive as important to the success of their business (Mitchelmore, *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, Revell-Love & Revell-Love (2016) used the measurement adapted from Mitchelmore & Rowley's work (2013) to conduct an analysis of the perceived competencies of entrepreneurs who utilize information-marketing companies in order to develop business skills.

Kyndt & Baert (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of a psychometric quality questionnaire which assesses competencies considered in the literature to be important for entrepreneurs. Roblesa *et al.* (2015) undertook an investigation to identify the key individual competencies that determine whether or not a person is an entrepreneur. Dimitratos *et al.* (2014) provided a comprehensive operationalization of those company-specific variables constituting entrepreneurial competencies within the context of multinational enterprise subsidiaries.

The objective of the research reported here is to propose a conceptual framework of entrepreneurial competencies (EC) and its structure comprising the following elements; introduction, literature review, section on building a conceptual framework, discussion and conclusion. The introduction consists of the study background that generates research questions. The literature review identifies both the research gap and research position. The conceptual framework building consists of a description of how to construct such a framework. The main findings and scientific contributions are discussed in the next section. Finally, a summary of the research is provided in the conclusion.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

EC is assuming an increasingly important role worldwide in promoting success within both business and the workplace. While research into entrepreneurial competencies is intensifying and gaining enhanced legitimacy within the scientific community, it lacks comprehensive conceptualization, a meaningful framework and qualitative measurement tools for SMEs. Thus, it can be said that the study of competencies in the previous literatures on entrepreneurship is in its preliminary phase (Brinckmann, 2008). This is probably due to the fact that most studies focus on quantitative measurement based on previous tools or frameworks. Few studies present any form of conceptualization of EC, while even fewer build on frameworks to elaborate on this phenomenon.

Competence is a concept possessing many applications (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010) typically driven by goals to achieve business performance (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). There are two key terms relating to competencies: one being individual behavior and the other minimum standards of performance (Strebler *et al.*, 1997). Entrepreneurial competencies are a constellation or group of characteristics associated with successful business development. Competencies can range from personality traits and individual motivations to specific knowledge and skills. Traits and motivations can also spur the development of entrepreneurial competencies. Such competencies impact entrepreneurial performance through the mechanisms of venture opportunities, venture strategy and venture growth (Olien & Wetenhall, 2013).

Competencies are skills that can be learned which enable people to perform successfully. Therefore, recognizing and identifying competencies is very important for educators and the development of learning

opportunities. (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). There have been several conceptualizations of entrepreneurial competencies, but few studies that explore the types of competencies needed by entrepreneurs possessing businesses of differing scale. In the context of entrepreneurship, competencies are particularly related to the birth and sustainability of a business. Research shows that the competencies of entrepreneurs contribute to business performance such as profitability and growth (Bird, 1995).

There are two terms of competencies that have been used by many authors, these being “skills” or “expertise”. Besides, there are four main categories of competencies, namely; human relations competencies, conceptual and relationship competencies, business and management competencies, and entrepreneurial competencies. Many authors agree that several competencies are very important for entrepreneurs, such as conceptual and analytical competencies, the ability to recognize and exploit opportunities, management skills, the ability to formulate strategies for taking advantage of opportunities, customer management skills, decision-making skills, hiring skills, leadership skills, delegation and motivation skills, and commitment (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010).

### **3. BUILDING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

A conceptual framework possesses ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. The procedures necessary to build such a framework are as follows (Ghina *et al.*, 2015):

Phase 1: Ontological assumptions.

Ontological assumptions relate to knowledge of the way things are, the nature of reality, real existence, and real action (Jabareen, 2009). Based on the research topic, ontological questions include the following; What is the form and nature of entrepreneurial competencies? How can we understand the existence of entrepreneurial competencies? The answer to these questions, the nature of entrepreneurial competencies' reality, is external to the researcher. It can be both captured by our senses and predicted on the basis of knowledge of previous causal events.

To be an entrepreneurial person requires the ability to respond and adapt to ambiguity. This ability encourages entrepreneurs to become dynamic, flexible and self-regulating. In reality, increased levels of competence do not automatically result in expertise (Markowska, 2011). This means that the development of entrepreneurial competency represents a crucial aspect of business sustainability.

The reality of low rates of established business ownership at both local and global levels leads SMEs to have to create new value efficiently. Entrepreneurial competencies facilitate this process of performing successfully. An entrepreneurial competency is interpreted objectively and emerges progressively through a series of entrepreneurial processes, teaching or training.

The next task is identifying text types and other sources of data. The words ‘Competence’ / ‘Competency’ / ‘Competencies’ constitute a set of terms with widespread use in the human resource development domain, where they are used in assessing job performance within the entrepreneurship context (Moore *et al.*, 2002). Consequently, the headwords ‘Entrepreneurial’, ‘Competencies’, and ‘Entrepreneurial Competencies’ are defined through reference to dictionaries and the existing literature on the subject. The mapping of such definitions can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Mapping of the Definitions of Entrepreneurial, Competencies, and Entrepreneurial Competencies (Ontological Assumptions)**

<i>Word</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>References</i>
<b>Entrepreneurial</b>	“Adjectiverelating to a person who organizes, operates, and assumes the risk for a business venture”.	(American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2011)
	“Adjective relating to an entrepreneur; entrepreneurial risks”.	(Word Net 3.0, Farlex Clipart Collection, 2012)
	“Adjective ; willing to take risks in order to make a profit”.	(WordNet 3.0, Farlex Clipart Collection, 2012)
	“Adjective; characterized by the taking of financial risks in the hope of profit; enterprising: an entrepreneurial culture, entrepreneurial spirit thrives on meeting the next challenge”.	( <i>Entrepreneurial</i> , n.d.)
<b>Competence/Competent</b>	“A skill or ability”.	(American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2011)
	“The quality of being adequately or well qualified physically and intellectually”.	(WordNet 3.0, Farlex Clipart Collection, 2012)
	“The quality of being able to perform; a quality that permits or facilitates achievement or accomplishment”.	(WordNet 3.0, Farlex Clipart Collection, 2012)
	“The ability to do something successfully or efficiently”.	( <i>Competence</i> , n.d.)
<b>Entrepreneurial Competence</b>	“Ability to envisage new realities and making them come true – know why (attitudes, values, motives), Know-how (skills), know who (social skills), know when (insights) & know what (knowledge)”.	(Markowska, 2011)
	“Ability to recognize and envision taking advantage of opportunity and to see the venture through to fruition”.	
	“Ability to sustain temporal tension, strategic focus and intentional posture combined with entrepreneurial bonding, ability to create and restructure relationships”.	
	“Ability to recognize and envision taking advantage of opportunity combined with the ability to acquire and utilize resources”.	
	“Opportunity recognition & market development, relationship, conceptual, organizing, strategic & commitment competencies”.	
	“New pathways for achieving innovation-related business targets & ability to identify and pursue opportunities”.	
	“Knowledge, skills and attitudes that affect the willingness and ability to perform the entrepreneurial job of new value creation; that can be measured directly or indirectly and be improved through training and development”.	Lackeus (2013)

Therefore, the definitions contained in previous literature present entrepreneurial competencies as constituting a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that facilitate successful new value creation which can be acquired and developed through teaching or training.

#### Phase 2: Epistemological assumptions.

Epistemology is a means of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. It is also concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate (Crotty, 2003). For the epistemological question of how we know what entrepreneurial competencies really are the answer is constrained by the response to the ontological question above. Knowledge about entrepreneurial competencies is objective and generated deductively from the theory of entrepreneurship education.

The knowledge and concept of entrepreneurial competencies are created through interaction between people and their environment (learning process). Within this view, knowledge about entrepreneurial competencies is seen as a collection of objective constructs. This epistemological assumption directly influences how the knowledge of Entrepreneurial Competencies is produced.

An important factor within entrepreneurial competencies, apart from knowledge (know what) and skills (know how), is the development of appropriate attitudes and motives (know why), social skills (know who) and insights (know when). These abilities help to visualize new value creation, and making them a reality (Markowska, 2011).

#### Phase 3: Methodological assumptions.

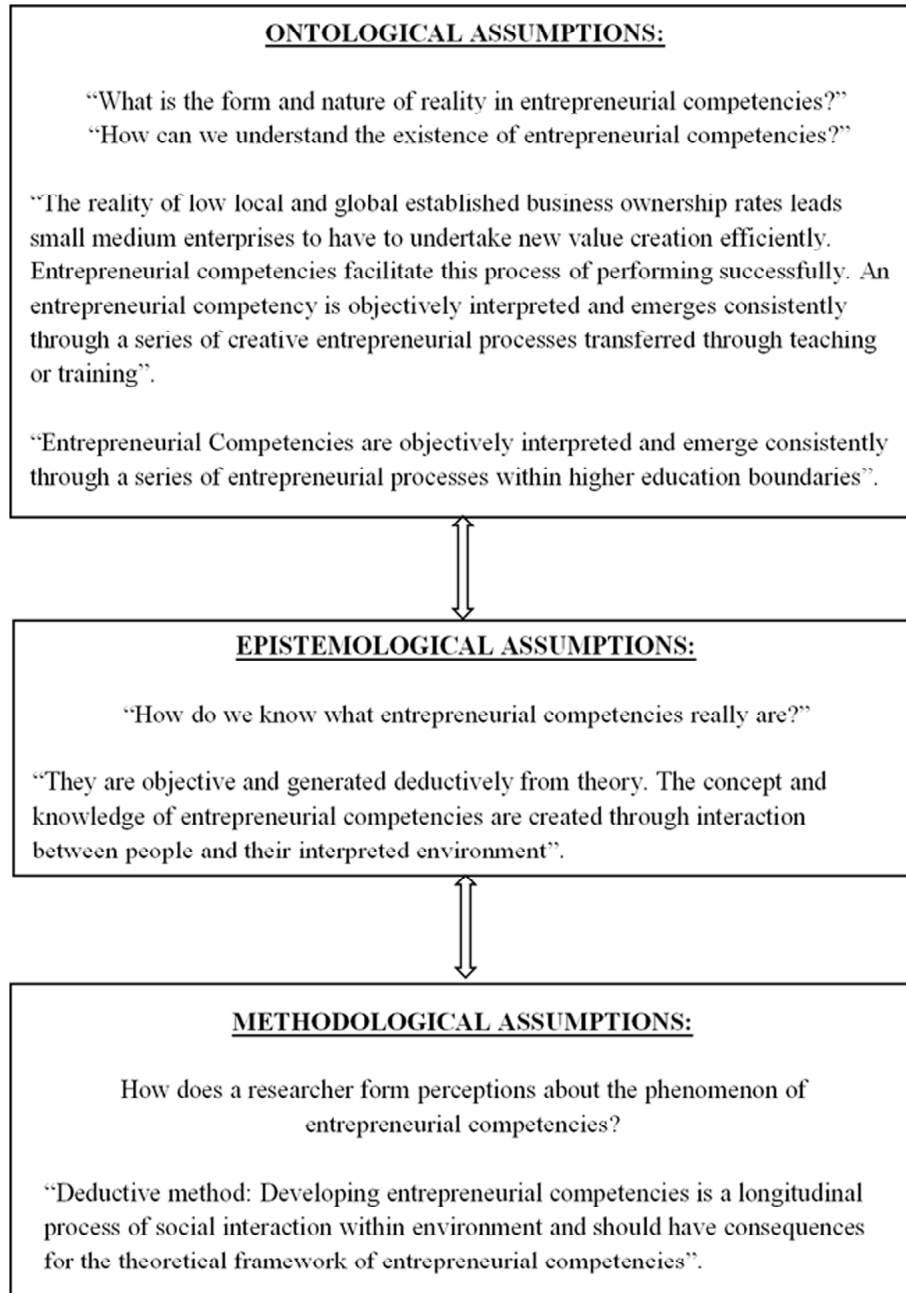
Methodology is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to desired outcomes (Crotty, 2003). The question underlying the methodological assumptions is that of how a researcher forms perceptions about entrepreneurial competencies? The transactional nature of this research topic is acquired through its deductive method. It is important to study the previous literature regarding how to develop entrepreneurial competencies, so that it can be synthesized in building a conceptual framework.

#### Phase 4: Integrating concepts

The aim of this phase is to integrate the processes completed in Phases 1, 2 and 3 and to group together the concepts that emerge from a review of the relevant literature. It describes the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions relating to entrepreneurial graduates. The framework path is illustrated in Figure 2.

#### Phase 5: Synthesis Phase

This phase explains how to develop entrepreneurial competencies. The conceptual framework is constructed from key components of competencies which consist of knowledge/ thought/ know-what/ cognition; skills/ action/ know-how/ conation; attitudes/ emotion/ know-why/ affection. Competence development can be studied from the input side (triggers to competence), process (task or behavior leading to competence), or consequences (outcomes of achieving standards of competence) (Markowska, 2011). The triggers of entrepreneurial competence are beliefs, goal orientation and contextual embeddedness. Beliefs are the powerful assumptions which give the deeply-meaning to individual experiences (Krueger, 2007). Goal

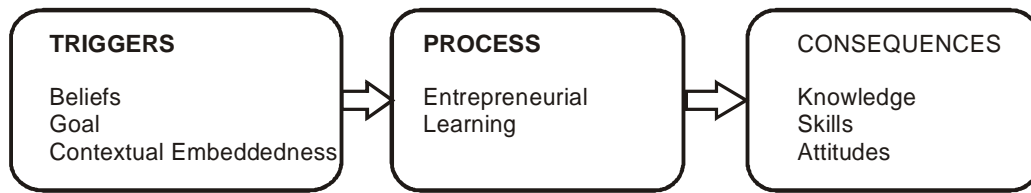


**Figure 2: The Framework Path of Entrepreneurial Competencies**

orientation consists of the individual management technique to achieve specific outcomes (Bandura, 1977), which also represent the motivation of entrepreneurs to perform well (Skinner, 1995). Social embeddedness is the environment which individual involved in and its social interaction will influence the entrepreneur’s cognition (Panzarasa & Jennings, 2002).

Well-developed entrepreneurial competence is of pivotal importance for business performance. Expertise comes with an increase in competence and the ability to apply it. Expertise represents the highest level of acquired competence and can thus be defined as the ability to perform a task excellently (with

superior results) in a particular domain (Mitchell, *et al.*, 2009). This ability encompasses knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The three blocks of entrepreneurial competencies framework can be seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: The Entrepreneurial Competencies Framework**

#### Phase 6: Building the entrepreneurial competencies framework

This phase constitutes a re-synthesis of several concepts which are reintegrated to construct the conceptual framework of entrepreneurial competencies. The framework of entrepreneurial competencies covers triggers, processes, and consequences. The triggers of competencies include beliefs, goals, and contextual embeddedness. The process of developing competence consists of entrepreneurial learning (Markowska, 2011), such as learning by doing (Lackeus *et al.*, 2013). Lackeus *et al.*, (2013) proposed a framework for how to develop and measure knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The consequences of the entrepreneurial process in this framework are adapted from the EntreComp Framework. EntreComp defines entrepreneurship as the universal competence which applies to all spheres of life. The EntreComp Framework is made up of three competence-related areas: Ideas and opportunities (Vision, Creativity, Spotting opportunities, Valuing ideas, Ethical and sustainable thinking); Resources (Self-awareness and self-efficacy, Motivation and perseverance, Financial and economic literacy, Mobilizing resources, Mobilizing others); and Into action (Taking the initiative, Planning and management, Working with others, Learning through experience, Coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk). Each sub-variables is divided into the categories of knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are the building blocks of competence (Bacigalupo *et al.*, 2016). The entrepreneurial competencies framework can be seen in Figure 4.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Previous studies have highlighted the unsystematic categorization of an entrepreneurial competencies framework consisting of key stakeholders and their roles in effective business performance. A systematic guideline is required for further development of entrepreneurial competencies, particularly for SMEs, in order for such commercial entities to prove commercially successful.

The issue of competency measurement is central to both research and practice. Approaches to measuring competencies have been varied in nature, depending on underlying assumptions and predictions. McGowan, *et al.* (2001) explored the competencies required by the entrepreneurial small firm owner/manager for the effective use of the internet in managing customer relationships. Dullayaphuta, & Untachaia (2013) provided a quantitative measure of the human resource competency of SMEs in Thailand. Mitchelmore, S. & Rowley, J. (2013) reported on the business competencies of female entrepreneurs. A similar study was conducted by Revell-Love & Revell-Love (2016) who analyzed the perceived commercial competencies of such individuals who utilize information marketing businesses as a means of learning

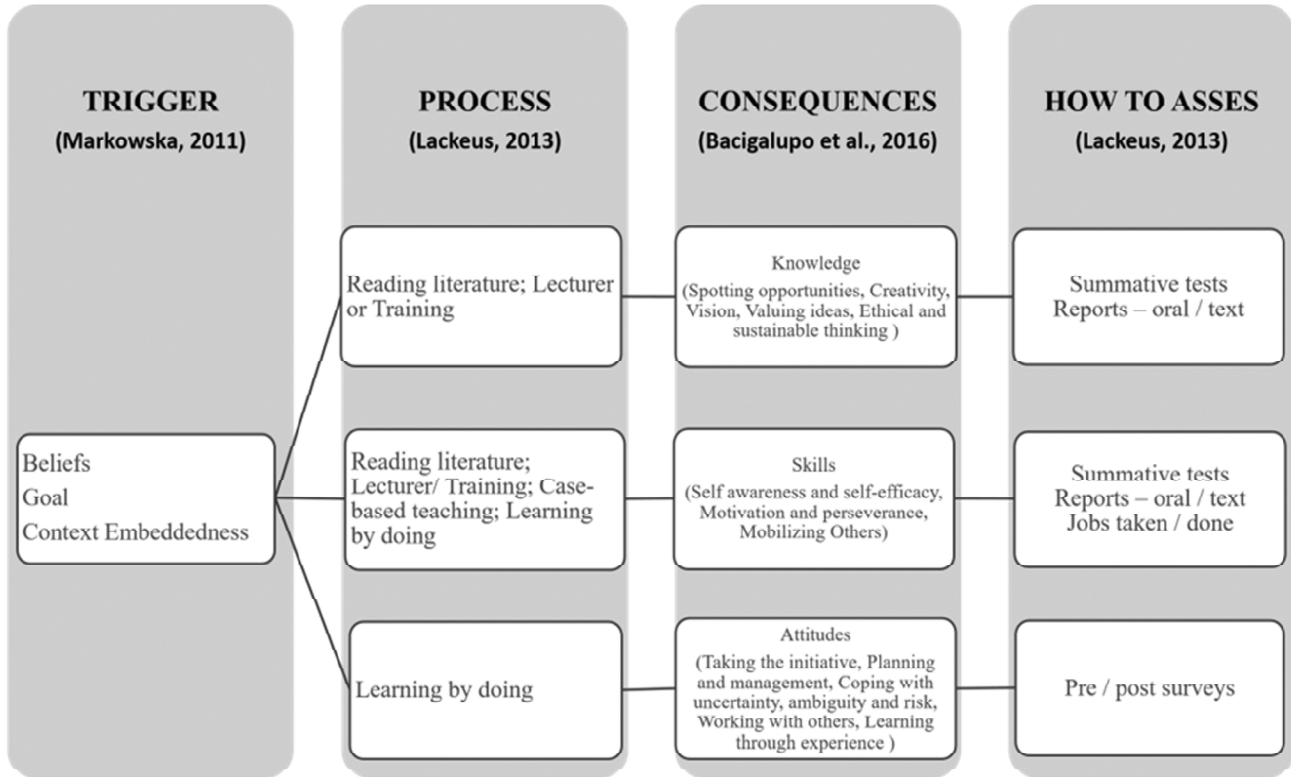


Figure 4: The Entrepreneurial Competencies Framework

entrepreneurial skills. Researchers such as Mitchelmore, *et al.* (2014) identified the entrepreneurial competencies that female SME owners perceive to be important to the success of their enterprises. Other researchers, including Kyndt & Baert (2015), assessed the psychometric quality of a questionnaire evaluating competencies considered in the relevant literature to be important for entrepreneurs. In addition, they examined the instrument’s predictive value three to five years after its completion..

Previous researchers tended to conduct investigations based on quantitative measurement, since few studies were found to use qualitative measurement. The literature confirms a lack of effective measurement necessary to assess the entrepreneurial competencies of small-scale SMEs. Some form of broader in-depth measurement of entrepreneurial competencies, particularly those of small businesses, is therefore required.

The main finding of the research reported here emerges from the conceptual model analysis of a theoretical framework for entrepreneurial competencies to develop business sustainability. This framework covers three blocks of triggers, processes, and consequences. This research’s scientific contribution lies in the use of this proposed conceptual framework for several goals: (a) as a guideline for effective teaching / training to create entrepreneurial competencies effectively, (b) as a guideline for effective measurement of entrepreneurial competencies development, (c) to help practitioners to understand the key components of competencies necessary for entrepreneurs to achieve business sustainability.

Markowska’s 2011 study proposed a framework for entrepreneurial competencies using triggers, processes, and consequences. This framework does not show the key components of expertise (such as



knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and how to develop it. The EntreComp Framework by Bacigalupo et al., (2016) consists of 15 aspects of entrepreneurial competency validated through multi-stakeholders consultation. This is a valuable contribution but the framework does not show how to develop these competencies. The study conducted by Lackeus *et al.* (2013) has proposed a framework as to how to develop and measure competencies. However, it constitutes an unsystematic arrangement of triggers, process, and consequences. The conceptual framework proposed by the present study covers three key blocks of entrepreneurial competencies (triggers, processes, and consequences) as well as their key important components (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and the entrepreneurial process necessary to develop and measure them.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Research into entrepreneurial competencies is both expanding and gaining enhanced legitimacy within the scientific community. On the other hand, it lacks comprehensive elements of conceptualization, framework and qualitative measurement for SMEs. Thus, it can be argued that the study of entrepreneurial competencies in the previous literature is in its preliminary phase. This study strives to bridge the research gap confronting those interested in the subject of SMEs' entrepreneurial competencies.

There are several important findings which emerge from the research described above. First, the need for a conceptual framework to act as a guideline for effective teaching / training intended to develop business sustainability. Second, the entrepreneur has to manage three key distinct, yet interrelated, competencies in order to perform successfully, namely; knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Finally, this framework can be used as a guideline for developing and measuring competencies.

This scientific contribution of the research described here consists of a building process comprising a proposed conceptual framework and a concept structure arranged within a system functioning as a guideline to view reality. It can be used to guide mapping the existing practice emerging from SMEs' entrepreneurial competencies and how to develop and measure it. The future research suggested here is that of conduct-mapping and evaluation to gain a better understanding of the existing entrepreneurial competencies of SMEs. This measurement can then be used as a guideline for the further development of training to effectively improve such competencies.

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