

Relational influence on entrepreneurial orientation: an exploratory study of small religious enterprises in Brazil

Small religious enterprises

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Victor Silva Corrêa

Postgraduate Program in Business Administration, UNIP, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Julio Araújo Carneiro-da-Cunha and Vânia Maria Jorge Nassif

Postgraduate Program in Administration – Nove de Julho University, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and

Ernesto Michelangelo Giglio

Postgraduate Program in Business Administration, UNIP, Sao Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

Purpose – Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is highly emerging in the management literature. However, recent studies highlight the necessity to associate with reflections on this theme, usually approached from an economic perspective, propositions also derived from relational approaches. This paper aims to investigate associations between EO and social networks, specifically about the still little explored relational coupling/decoupling theme.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper provides an empirical and qualitative study of religious entrepreneurs. A total of 18 pastors responsible for creating and leading independent neo-Pentecostal churches located in Belo Horizonte/Brazil, selected using the snowball technique, participated in this qualitative, case-study research. Two analysis categories guided data collection: pastors' EO (behaviors suggestive of their innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy) and churches' social framework (the resources and attributes that pastors obtain from their institutional structure).

Findings – The study concludes that pastors combine attributes representing their EO and their social structure in developing their religious endeavors.

Research limitations/implications – Among the limitations are the restricted use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection source and the absence of data proving the churches' performance.

Originality/value – The paper contributes by showing that entrepreneurs can influence the structure of their networks by using EO; proving that networks influence pastors' EO; revealing recursivity between EO and networks; emphasizing a relational dimension of the EO construct and presenting new theoretical propositions that can be explored and tested in future investigations.

Keywords Entrepreneurial orientation, Social networks, Coupling, Decoupling, Religious entrepreneurship

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

In studies on entrepreneurship, there prevails a notion from economics that entrepreneurs are rational, autonomous, self-sufficient individuals (Corrêa *et al.*, 2020; Lounsbury *et al.*, 2019; Tok and Kaminski, 2019). For instance, Lounsbury *et al.* (2019) have highlighted how the literature on entrepreneurship has been increasingly controlled by economic ideas that

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narrow focus to the nexus of individual opportunity. In that light, entrepreneurs are considered to be individuals who are rational and interested in themselves. Analogous to *homo economicus*, they can be described as a kind of “homo entrepreneur” (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2019, p. 1215). Such thinking can be coherently aligned with the approach known as entrepreneurial orientation (EO). Indeed, as Ejdenberg (2016, p. 825) has emphasized, the reflections of economists – in that study’s case, economists in Austria – can explain most literature on EO; for them, entrepreneurs are individuals “capable of identifying and exploiting resources and opportunities in an innovative way” and “producing value-added products and services.”

Researchers have considered literature on EO to be highly emergent in management studies (Galvão *et al.*, 2018; Luu and Ngo, 2019; Mahrous and Genedy, 2019; Mantok *et al.*, 2019; Shan *et al.*, 2016; Vaitoonkiat and Charoensukmongkol, 2020) and several authors have stressed the need for novel perspectives on the approach (Karami and Tang, 2019; Lajqi and Krasniqi, 2017). One such perspective relates to the scope of its interpretation. Although EO originated at the organizational level (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Moretti *et al.*, 2020; Njoroge *et al.*, 2020; Vaitoonkiat and Charoensukmongkol, 2020), recent contributions have emphasized the importance of investigating the approach in light of individual behavior (Fatima and Bilal, 2019; Galvão *et al.*, 2018; Luu and Ngo, 2019; Santos *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Ejdenberg (2016, p. 810) has asserted that EO is an “important individual characteristic,” while Santos *et al.* (2020, p. 190) have underscored how the construct “can refer to both organizations and individuals.” Galvão *et al.* (2018, p. 29), in turn, have even observed that “when researchers study the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals, it is almost impossible not to speak of their entrepreneurial orientation.” In that sense, five attributes have been identified to characterize entrepreneurs: innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy (Galvão *et al.*, 2018; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018).

A second perspective concentrates on the entrepreneur’s atomized character. From that viewpoint, Patriotta and Siegel (2019, p. 1195) have highlighted how entrepreneurship fields, particularly that of EO, cannot develop if they do not venture beyond the construct’s economic characterization as represented by the so-called “homo entrepreneur.” According to those authors, the economically based literature has “offered a decontextualized view of entrepreneurship, removed from its social context” (Patriotta and Siegel, 2019, p. 1194). In response, concepts of social networks formed to complement theories focused on individual traits have endorsed the notion that entrepreneurs are embedded in social contexts that either stimulate or restrict behavior. Thus, for Lajqi and Krasniqi (2017, p. 387), entrepreneurs can only “be understood and interpreted if we position them within[...] social networks and not as atomized decision-makers who maximize their uses.”

Against that background, we sought to answer the following research question: How is entrepreneurs’ EO associated with network coupling and decoupling? To that end, we conducted an exploratory investigation of the possible associations between EO and social networks, an investigation called for by several authors (Jiang *et al.*, 2018; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Suyanto and Pratono, 2016). Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.* (2018, p. 1), for example, have stressed how studies on EO should move “toward less explored areas such as social capital,” hence this paper’s theoretical focus. This paper particularly associates both themes in an empirical study on religious entrepreneurs, namely, neo-Pentecostal pastors responsible for creating and managing independent churches. It is essential to understand EO in non-traditional sectors because EO is primarily determined by the context in which it is applied (Covin *et al.*, 2006). Along those lines, analyzing pastors as entrepreneurs has previously proven fruitful. In a

study conducted in the USA, [Pearce et al. \(2010\)](#) concluded that pastors with greater EO had more successful religious organizations than those who did not.

Our study was designed to focus on and partly close some gaps in the literature on EO. The first gap relates to EO's dimensions ([Galvão et al., 2018](#)). [Luu and Ngo \(2019, p. 1\)](#) have posited that "literature on EO has drawn attention to the need for more research on the effects of individual dimensions." Although EO has developed over the past 40 years, [Santos et al. \(2020, p. 191\)](#) have emphasized that research on the topic "is still scarce at the individual level." By contrast, a second gap concerns the need for studies on EO in emerging economic contexts such as Brazil ([Mantok et al., 2019; Moretti et al., 2020](#)). On that topic, [Moretti et al. \(2020, p. 220\)](#) have highlighted how research on EO "conducted in emerging or transitional economies, particularly those dedicated to small firms, is still scarce." Such scarcity is especially apparent in the study of religious entrepreneurship investigated here.

The third gap relates to the association between EO and literature on social networks. [Corrêa et al. \(2017, p. 338\)](#) have highlighted the importance of novel studies "on external or structural factors," including social networks, "capable of influencing the entrepreneurial orientation of religious agents." [Diáñez-González and Camelo-Ordaz \(2019\)](#), in turn, have demonstrated how research examining the connections between social networks and EO has been few and far between. In a title search (i.e. entrepreneurial orientation and network* or entrepreneurial orientation and *coupling or entrepreneurial orientation and networks) of articles on Web of Science published from 2015 to 2020, those authors found only 16 works.

Even then, none of those articles considered EO in the context of general networks or recent literature on relational coupling and decoupling emphasized in this paper. A decade ago, [Granovetter \(2009\)](#) advocated the importance of social coupling and decoupling in studies on entrepreneurship, particularly that "combinations of social cohesion [...] with the circumstances that limit the non-economic claims that hinder its rationalization" are needed to understand entrepreneurial activity ([Granovetter, 2009, p. 258](#)). Put differently, a relative adjustment between coupling and decoupling is needed. Despite the relevance of those concepts, as [Corrêa et al. \(2018\)](#) have observed, coupling and decoupling have not received researchers' attention in either management or entrepreneurship.

Our combined study of EO with coupling and decoupling has allowed us to make some novel contributions with this paper. The first is a set of propositions that can be verified and expanded in future studies, while the second is an expansion of research on the topic by highlighting the importance of understanding entrepreneurs as socially situated. Last, the third contribution is an innovative examination of the recursiveness and dynamism at play between the representative attributes of EO and social networks.

This article supports the idea that literature on EO would become more robust and accrue explanatory power if its association with general literature on social networks, specifically relational coupling and decoupling, were more comprehensive. To that purpose, findings of the recursive balance of pastors' EO and churches' network coupling–decoupling can be significant. At the same time, we propose that such a dilemma should be investigated from a systemic perspective, not a traditional correlational one.

In our case, the findings suggest that leaders who can better take advantage of their EO-related attributes are more successful in a balanced social structure. Understanding the effectiveness of EO, thus, relates to managers' internal attributes and the context in which those managers are embedded. By extension, that finding should afford new perspectives in studies on EO.

Theoretical background

Entrepreneurs' profile as atomized agents with personal characteristics that allow them to differentiate themselves in the market is not necessarily recent (Tok and Kaminski, 2019). The origins of that viewpoint date back to Schumpeter's (1982, p. 105) distinction that "the carrying out of new combinations we call 'enterprise,' the individuals whose function it is to carry them out we call 'entrepreneurs.'" According to Schumpeter, it is the entrepreneur's responsibility to promote innovation, the continuous introduction of which can reshape the balance of market structures in the so-called "circular flow" economy. Following Schumpeter's reasoning, entrepreneurs are, thus, producers of new opportunities and atomistic, self-sufficient agents whose personal attributes successfully differentiate them in the entrepreneurial context (Hmieleski *et al.*, 2015).

EO is an element of that entrepreneurial profile (Ejdenberg, 2016). Individual EO is based on the premise that entrepreneurs carry out initiatives to achieve workable, desirable results (Santos *et al.*, 2020). That approach recognizes entrepreneurs, religious or otherwise (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017; Pearce *et al.*, 2010), as individuals with skills in multidimensionally combining fundamental personal attributes that form the basis for entrepreneurial decision-making (Santos *et al.*, 2020; Shan *et al.*, 2016). To date, the literature on EO has emphasized five such attributes: innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy (Galvão *et al.*, 2018; Luu and Ngo, 2019; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Santos *et al.*, 2020; Shan *et al.*, 2016).

Mustafa *et al.* (2018, p. 303) have pinpointed the first attribute, innovativeness, as the most common entrepreneurial behavior at the personal level. In short, *innovativeness* is the capacity to conduct exploratory activities into the novel and unknown (Kraus *et al.*, 2019). That is, activities that seek to support novel ideas, novelties, experiments and creative processes can result in new products, services and technologies (Kraus *et al.*, 2019; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). By contrast, the second, *proactivity*, refers to the capacity to anticipate and respond to problems and needs (Kraus *et al.*, 2019; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). For entrepreneurs, it implies acting in anticipation of market demands, developing new products and/or improving current ones ahead of competitors (Luu and Ngo, 2019; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018).

Third, *competitive aggressiveness* describes the intensity of efforts to compete against and outperform competitors (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). It suggests a willingness to face competitors with a robust offensive stance (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). In recent years, authors have emphasized the manifestation of competitive aggressiveness in the religious context (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017; Pearce *et al.*, 2010). Among them, Pearce *et al.* (2010, p. 227) concluded that "while the preferred form of competition ranges from subtle to overt, all denominations strive to maintain and grow their membership through competitive means."

Fourth, *risk-taking* is associated with a willingness to take action in uncertain environments beyond commonly accepted practices (Nwankwo and Gbadamosi, 2013; Pearce *et al.*, 2010; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). Taking risks supports the entrepreneurial task of seeking out opportunities despite uncertainty about the likelihood of success or the consequences of actions (Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). Fifth and finally, *autonomy* refers to the entrepreneurs' capacity to act independently and decide for themselves what to do and how (Luu and Ngo, 2019).

Regarding religious contexts, EO has been the subject of two recent studies: one in the USA (Pearce *et al.*, 2010), the other in Brazil (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017). In the first, Pearce *et al.* (2010) quantitatively investigated traditional evangelical Lutheran churches and highlighted their study's value in relation to entrepreneurial behavior in religious

congregations. Because the congregations could receive help from their pastors' entrepreneurial behaviors, the authors concluded that innovativeness and autonomy are more strongly associated with the development of religious congregations than proactivity, risk-taking and competitive aggressiveness (Pearce *et al.*, 2010).

In the second study, Corrêa *et al.* (2017) qualitatively investigated neo-Pentecostal pastors and similarly concluded that pastors' behavior influences their churches' performance (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017). By comparison, they concluded that risk-taking, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness and autonomy contributed most significantly to religious congregations' development, although the last three had the clearest impact (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017). However, they added that such findings do not mean that innovativeness is unproductive (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017) because neo-Pentecostal pastors had continued to benefit from innovation. Their data nevertheless suggested that pastors took less ownership of their innovativeness than any other entrepreneurial attribute examined. Such anecdotal evidence underscores the plausibility that more innovative, creative pastors can obtain more satisfactory results than their peers (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017).

Despite those studies, researchers investigating EO have disregarded recent calls to incorporate relational dimensions into reflections on the construct (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017; Jiang *et al.*, 2018; Lajqi and Krasniqi, 2017; Patriotta and Siegel, 2019; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). In that context, Granovetter's (1973, 1985, 2009) ideas are highly relevant and scholars have indeed recognized Granovetter's (1985) seminal paper as a pillar of "new economic sociology" (Corrêa *et al.*, 2020), a research strand that supports the need to consider economic action as social action. In that paper, Granovetter (1985) presented the idea of embeddedness, one of the most influential concepts in the social sciences in recent decades. According to Granovetter (1990), all economic activity is embedded in complex, ongoing social and economic relationships explicable only by closely analyzing how people function in such networks. As such, economic activity cannot be explained by an individual's motives because it is embedded in networks of personal relationships, not atomized actors (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Granovetter, 1992).

In that way, Granovetter (1985) has established embeddedness as a metaphor for explaining economic transactions' social and cultural factors (McCleary, 2011). Over time, embeddedness has become an analytical concept for researchers interested in the role and importance of social networks in entrepreneurial activity (McCleary, 2011). Granovetter (2009) even developed his initial reflections into a typology based on two primary concepts: coupling and decoupling. On the one hand, *coupling* underscores the importance of so-called "horizontal solidarity," a term given to mutual aid between individuals generated from the trust. Granovetter (2009) has stressed the importance of trust in building enterprises larger than those managed by individuals or families (Granovetter, 2009). To cultivate trust, individuals have to be engaged in a group of people who identify as individuals belonging to that same collective (Granovetter, 2009). Their collectivity can be ethnic or characterized by more specific markers, including place of origin (Granovetter, 2009). On the other, *decoupling* suggests the relevance of relative social disengagement or disconnection, which can prove essential in specific situations. Granovetter (2009) especially stressed how such social distance can allow entrepreneurs to avoid "uncontrolled solidarity" and abusive claims from closer contacts (e.g. friends and family) capable of impairing the efficiency of enterprises and preventing its rationalization.

Granovetter (2009) developed his arguments for coupling and decoupling by studying cases of immigrant entrepreneurs, specifically from China, who had become successful in other countries. According to his data, entrepreneurs in China and people in general, "can suffer from excessive claims" (Granovetter, 2009, p. 258). However, by migrating to other

countries, Chinese entrepreneurs reap a dual benefit, first from integrating with other people from China in the host countries' dense social networks offering trust and horizontal solidarity, usually based on shared ethnicity and language. The second benefit, by contrast, stems from avoiding uncontrolled solidarity. That same ethnicity that bonds people from China together in foreign countries decouples all other individuals because they do not share the same ethnic and/or geopolitical contiguities. Consequently, as the cases revealed, entrepreneurs can indeed obtain advantages as immigrants (Granovetter, 2009) by preventing claims upon and requests about their different resources from the local community. In other words, entrepreneurs in China commonly leave their homes for new communities where their relatives are not so abundant (Granovetter, 2009).

To succeed, developing enterprises need to strike an adequate balance between coupling and decoupling (Granovetter, 2009), which, in turn, requires defining the boundary where intensity and trust fall sharply (Granovetter, 2009). Such boundaries are needed to sustain internal trust and limit the group's claims upon the constructed economic organization (Granovetter, 2009). Although the balance between coupling and decoupling can partly derive from historical and economic circumstances beyond individuals' control, Granovetter (2009) has also argued that it is subject to marginal manipulation that should not be ignored.

Among authors who have applied Granovetter's (2009) ideas about coupling and decoupling in their studies (Busch and Barkema, 2020; Corrêa *et al.*, 2018; Li, 2020; Sommer and Gamper, 2018), Corrêa *et al.* (2018) investigated the influence of religious entrepreneurs' coupling and decoupling on the trajectory of their institutions. Ultimately, they concluded that pastors and their congregations seem capable of striking a balance in their social structure, particularly by supporting each other in dense networks of mutual solidarity (Corrêa *et al.*, 2018). By the same token, decoupling would also be institutional. Thus, Corrêa *et al.* (2018) emphasized that the congregational collectivity that engages pastors and their congregations in cohesive mutual aid networks is the same structure that limits their sociability. Therefore, pastors and their followers find themselves decoupled from people not embedded in their churches, including their families.

The association between reflections on EO and social networks in the context of religious entrepreneurs suggests that their enterprises' development may eventually result from the isolated influence of two fundamental factors. The first is the predisposition of pastors to being entrepreneurs. Theoretically, church leaders have skills in behaviors associated with innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy (Corrêa *et al.*, 2017; Pearce *et al.*, 2010). The second factor is their ability to create socio-structural balance in their institutions – that is, adequate adjustment between social coupling and decoupling (Corrêa *et al.*, 2018; Granovetter, 2009). Taken together, those reflections can be grouped in an integrated framework (Figure 1) capable of elucidating the dynamics involved in pastors' work as entrepreneurs.

Method

Design

Our study was designed to explore how entrepreneurs' EO is associated with coupling and decoupling in relation to social networks – that is, to form an in-depth understanding of the possible associations between EO and social networks. To that end, we conducted a multiple-case study, a qualitative method deemed adequate for investigating given phenomena (Yin, 2015b) and when researchers seek, as we do, to construct and test new theories and approaches (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). Two elements formed the units of empirical analysis (Yin, 2015a): the pastors' EO (i.e. behaviors suggesting their innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy) and the

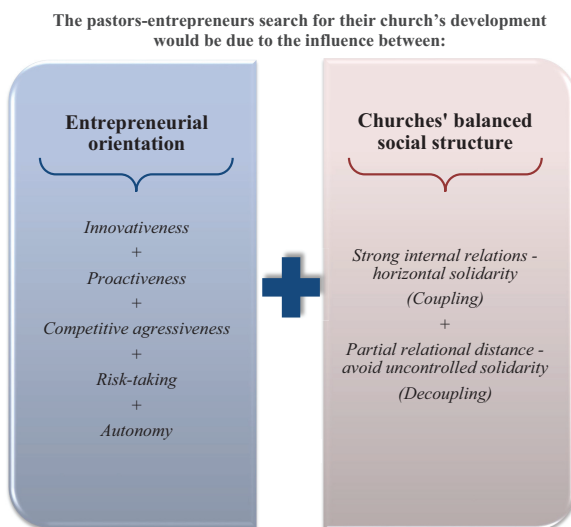


Figure 1.
Proposed integrated
analysis framework

churches' social framework (i.e. resources and attributes that pastors obtain from their social coupling and decoupling).

Case selection

Our multiple-case study cases, chosen for their empirical relevance, were all pastors responsible for creating and managing evangelical neo-Pentecostal churches. Demographic data suggest that 14 million evangelicals in Brazil – 33% of all evangelicals in the country – attend churches created by neo-Pentecostal pastors (www.ibge.gov.br/home/). On top of that, recent data showing that the number of evangelicals in Brazil has grown by 61% in the past decade (www.ibge.gov.br/home/) underscores the phenomenon of evangelicalism, including Pentecostalism, in the country.

In that context, a competitive market between evangelical churches has also recently surfaced (Corrêa and Vale, 2017; Mariano, 2007, 2013). In response, pastors in Brazil have had to act entrepreneurially to sustain their congregations' attention and commitment. In that endeavor, as Pierucci (2011) has stressed, each pastor has a unique goal; thus, "in Brazil's religious context, where everything is the result of a process of competitive liberalization, those who do not grow, shrink" (Pierucci, 2011, p. 474). For that reason, "plunged in an urgent dispute for more results and opportunities, for more efficiency in advertising and marketing—in other words, for more followers—contributors" (Pierucci, 2008, p. 15), neo-Pentecostal pastors in Brazil increasingly need to adopt entrepreneurial behaviors.

Despite the growth of the neo-Pentecostal community in the country and the entrepreneurialism of pastors embedded in it, researchers have rarely sought to understand Brazil's management of religious entrepreneurship (Corrêa and Vale, 2017; Pierucci, 2011). Among them, Corrêa *et al.* (2017, p. 12) have emphasized that "there are still great gaps in the country [...] in the study of churches as enterprises and of pastors as entrepreneurs." From none other than organizational researchers in Brazil, that observation justifies the adequacy of our empirical context for investigating EO in relation to coupling and decoupling. In

selecting units for empirical analysis, we considered location and accessibility and using snowball sampling, a technique in which participants introduce researchers to new potential participants (Collins and Stockton, 2018), we recruited 18 pastors at independent neo-Pentecostal churches in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. As a constructivist qualitative technique, snowball sampling was appropriate for our study because it generates a particular type of knowledge that is continuously developing, political and interactional (Noy, 2008) – that is, the knowledge that we aimed to form about the pastors’ EO and their social context. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the pastors, all of whom received pseudonyms for the sake of confidentiality.

Instrument

The instrument for data collection, considered to rank among the most important aspects of the case study method (Yin, 2015b), was an in-depth interview guide (Table 2) that we followed while conducting more than 35 h of interviews, all of which we recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

Categorizing and tabulating the empirical data allowed us to develop two hierarchical levels. The first level encompassed three topics: EO, social networks and associations between EO and networks. The more detailed second level, by contrast, included seven topics: five associated with EO (i.e. innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy) and two associated with networks (i.e. coupling and decoupling). Each sentence or paragraph constituted a non-exclusive record formed by combining the hierarchical levels, and any interview excerpt could fall into multiple categories.

To process the data, we conducted a content analysis with widely used categories representing EO and networks. Following Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) recommendation for directed content analysis and considering that EO and networks have been

Table 1.
Characteristics of
interviewed pastors

Pseudonym	Age (in years)	Gender	Interview duration (in minutes)
Abelardo	46	Man	116
Benedito	37	Man	99
Cristiano	42	Man	72
Damião	40	Man	101
Edmundo	52	Man	141
Fernando	34	Man	103
Gilberto	49	Man	70
Humberto	58	Man	194
Jefferson	39	Man	177
Kaio	41	Man	196
Leonardo	49	Man	142
Marcelo	58	Man	136
Osvaldo	51	Man	100
Pedro	50	Man	45
Raimundo	39	Man	82
Teodoro	63	Man	305
Valdomiro	47	Man	72
Zulmira	61	Woman	45

			Small religious enterprises
Dimension	Attribute	Open Question	
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)	Innovativeness	QQ1: How many new religious products or services have you created in the past five years? QQ2: Have you made any changes to your products or services in the past five years?	9
	Proactivity	QQ3: Have you ever taken any action or created a product or service that was later copied by other pastors? QQ4: How do you identify or create opportunities?	
	Competitive aggressiveness	QQ5: How are the relationships with the pastors of nearby churches? QQ6: How do pastors attract new members to their churches?	
	Risk-taking	QQ7: What do you consider to be a risk-taking attitude? QQ8: When you need to make decisions amid some degree of uncertainty, how do you usually react?	
	Autonomy	QQ9: How do you make decisions? QQ10: Other than you, are there other decision-makers in your church?	
Social networks	Coupling	QQ11: How is your relationship with church members and how are the relationships among the members themselves? QQ12: Do you help other pastors? How does such mutual aid occur?	Table 2. Interview guide
	Decoupling	QQ13: What services or help does your church offer? Who can take advantage of them? QQ14: Which people can enjoy the services and benefits created by the church?	
Associations between EO and social networks	–	QQ15: How does your behavior influence the structure of the church?	
		QQ16: How do church members impact your behavior?	

examined in the past, we analyzed a phenomenon that would benefit from further description. In particular, we identified how each theoretical category was characterized in Brazil’s specific context of the pastors’ networks. Subsequently, the content analysis’s internal trustworthiness was reinforced following the checklists of [Elo and Kyngäs \(2008\)](#) and [Elo et al. \(2014\)](#).

We used printed transcripts to indicate and comment upon content relevant to our analysis, which was simpler than using software for two reasons. First, Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was created for use in research with significant volumes of data ([Paulus et al., 2017](#)), which was not the case in our study. Second, we conducted our content analysis not to arrange text and thereby discover new categories but to describe some theoretical categories in considerable depth. Thus, we did not use any CAQDAS to avoid quantitative thinking about qualitative data ([Bezborodova and Bennett, 2004](#)), the software’s eventual agency in our data analysis ([Paulus et al., 2017](#)) and our confusion as researchers with a small data set at a distance from the field ([Gibbs and Flick, 2007](#)).

Data analysis was performed by comparing the evidence to the literature – that is, theoretical patterns were compared with empirical ones in the form of pattern matching ([Sinkovics, 2018](#)). The entire report describing and analyzing the data followed the multiple-case method suggested by [Yin \(2015a, 2015b\)](#), which does not prescribe sections for individual cases.

Results and analysis

Empirical data showed that evangelical churches compete with each other. In Cristiano's words, competition "exists and a lot." Moreover, the competition trend is "just increasing" (Edmundo). The competitiveness between churches is "so strong that it is even customary to watch other similar churches to see what they are doing." (Cristiano). Damião accentuated how there is an "industry of faith" today. Pastors "understand that any church under a different banner is a competitor" (Benedito). Damião emphasized how, currently, "the church is managed as if it were a company." There are "methods and techniques developed exclusively to increase the size and the revenue of the church and maintain its membership" (Humberto). According to Raimundo, "all strategies, in all areas, whatever the church can cover, must be undertaken."

Competitiveness between churches is partly due to the desire of pastors to grow their institutions. Osvaldo kept that "every pastor [...] wants a great ministry, just as I do." Cristiano, for instance, "would like to have a thousand members. Who does not want to have a thousand members?" For pastors, growing the church is an obligation. If the church "has 50 members, it must have 100. God asks for children." (Damião). Field data suggested that church development occurs through two practices: conversion of non-evangelical people; and proselytizing (the hunt for evangelical faithful from other competing churches). "There is a pastor who has no ethics at all. He invites your church members in front of you. What can you do?" (Humberto). Whether through conversion or proselytizing, it is possible to see elements representative of the pastors' EO.

Expressed in activities that support the latest ideas, novelties and experiments, innovativeness is clear in different actions (Kraus *et al.*, 2019). One of these actions is media work. "There is a church nowadays, called a media church" (Pedro). Gilberto stressed how "the work of the media makes it much more manageable. The church adopts cutting-edge techniques in this professional area." Another characteristically innovative initiative in the religious context is the drop in tithes. Kaio emphasized how there is a church that stipulates "9.5%; if The Bible presupposes 10%, why did he put 9.5%?" According to Humberto, "if you discover that you can pay tithes of only 9.5% and receive the same blessings as those who pay 10% [...] it is best to do the same." A third innovative practice is to explore religious miracles. Kaio stated that when a "miracle happens in your church, you can grow it to a thousand members [...] if you know how to exploit it in the media, creating propaganda."

The pastor's proactivity, in turn, is showed in the search for the conversion of new individuals. Damião emphasized how it is possible to win a new believer for the church "by donating a basic food basket." "Sometimes you hand out a leaflet to someone struggling, they pick it up and say: it never hurts to try" (Kaio). One of the most significant initiatives is a "mini-church," i.e. small religious meetings held in the faithful's homes selected by the pastor. Kaio explained that the practice is "similar to a franchise." The mini-church is an initiative based on the idea that "it is faithful who generate more faithful" (Gilberto).

The pastor's competitive aggressiveness is clear in the enactment of two fundamental goals: growing churches; and preventing the loss of believers to competing institutions. Aiming at church growth, pastors invite other church members. "We call this proselytizing. It means taking a believer out of one church and into another due to the advantages that person can bring." (Humberto). Humberto explained how there are pastors who "seek out the addresses of the faithful. It is essentially spying." The proselytizing practice occurs because "it is easier to find people who are already believers than to convert external, non-believers" (Fernando). Among pastors, phrases like "they are fishing in someone else's aquarium"

are common (Valdomiro). The most coveted believers are musicians (Kaio): “Good music is fundamental to attracting people and to making them stay” (Kaio).

To avoid the loss of believers, in turn, pastors engage in another set of actions. Humberto explained how “the shepherds’ greatest fear is their sheep going to another church.” To avoid this, pastors prohibit outside visits. According to Osvaldo, “there are moments when there is no way to free the faithful. Will I help another pastor instead of myself?” Kaio stated that his church members “cannot visit other ministries. If they are, they are considered disobedient.” Many pastors “cast a curse” when the faithful decide to visit other churches (Edmundo) or assert that “that it will not work, that the faithful will have to return” (Edmundo). Damião exemplified this as follows: “You are not going; you are under the curse. You will not because I will not let you. Then the sheep are very obedient. They end up not going.” Besides, to keep the faithful, pastors offer leadership positions in the church to some of them. The choice of leaders involves their socioeconomic conditions. “The person’s purchasing power helps in the position he has. People who have better purchasing power get better positions” (Humberto). The goal is to connect them to the church, discouraging them from leaving. “These people are very coveted” (Humberto). When giving them functions, they “do not leave the church” (Humberto).

Pastors’ willingness to take risks is clear, for instance, in the dependency on auxiliary pastors. On the one hand, auxiliary pastors contribute to the church’s growth, as they supply better service to the faithful’s diverse needs. On the other hand, they are among the main reasons for church divisions: “I have seen many cases like that. Some faithful leave with the dissident pastors and the rest stay with the titular pastor.” (Raimundo). Marcelo stressed how this might happen: the pastor leaves the “church talking to the faithful: I will open another church. Go there to help us. I mean? Competition, right.” “There are pastors who [...] entice leadership. It happened to me. A pastor came here, made friends with people and took 30 people away.” (Abelardo). Pastors’ willingness to take risks is also explicit in proselytizing practices, resulting in competitors’ retaliation to avoid losing their faithful. These practices are intimidating and daring because they have unintentional adverse effects. Currently, a pastor “knows that if he starts with many demands, he runs the risk of the faithful not staying” in the church (Marcelo). Finally, pastors’ ability to act independently is clear in all their actions (Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). The selection criteria themselves contributed to this by incorporating pastors responsible for their enterprises’ creation and conduct. Table 3 summarizes the EO dimensions and presents the symbolic elements in the investigated religious context.

The empirical evidence also suggests that other relational factors influence pastors’ search for their churches’ development. Data show that pastors build and sustain cohesive networks of relationships, specifically with their faithful: “We help each other a lot” (Leonardo) and “I have sought to create a church of people with cohesive relationships, which grows firmly” (Benedito). According to Fernando, “helping one another is key” among evangelicals; “You do not get in trouble.” This dense structure of mutual aid is clear between two groups of people. The first group is among the faithful themselves: “Here, they are very close” (Zulmira); “When a believer is in need, everyone in the church is willing to help financially and physically” (Teodoro); and “Sometimes, what the believer does not have within the family, we provide for him” (Kaio). The second group is between faithful and pastors: “They help me and I help them” (Leonardo). In Abelardo’s words, “Even I needed it myself. They came together and blessed my life. It is no shame for a pastor to say that.”

This mutual aid relationship with the faithful allows pastors to obtain different resources associated with their personal and professional spheres. In the personal sphere, Leonardo exemplified the help he received from a believer:

Table 3.
EO's dimensions,
objective
manifestations and
corroborative
evidence

Dimension	Objective manifestation	Illustrative evidence(s)
<i>Innovativeness</i>	Innovativeness manifests itself in: a) a drop in the percentage of tithing; b) means of communication appropriation	a) "If you discover that you can pay tithes of only 9.5% and receive the same blessings as those who pay 10% ... it is best to do the same." (Humberto) b) "There is a church nowadays, called a media church" (Pedro). "The work of the media makes it much more manageable. The church adopts cutting-edge techniques in this professional area." (Gilberto) a) "... by donating a basic food basket;" "Sometimes you hand out a leaflet to someone struggling, they pick it up and say: it never hurts to try" (Kaio) b) Practices "similar to a franchise" (Kaio). The mini-church is an initiative based on the idea that "it is faithful who generate more faithful" (Gilberto)
<i>Proactivity</i>	Proactivity manifests itself in attempts to convert new believers. To achieve this goal, pastors: a) evangelize from door to door; b) promote meetings with non-evangelical couples, etc	a) "We call this proselytizing. It means taking a believer out of one church and into another due to the advantages that that person can bring." (Humberto)
<i>Competitive aggressiveness</i>	Competitive aggressiveness manifests itself in the search for faithful growth and maintenance To increase the number of believers, pastors: a) visit religious leaders from other churches, manipulating them; b) invite believers from other churches; c) send believers to other churches, enticing their members To keep the number of faithful, pastors: d) forbid external visits; e) "cast a curse;" f) offers leadership functions to the wealthiest faithful	a) "It is easier to find people who are already believers than to convert external, non-believers" (Fernando) c) phrases like "they are fishing in someone else's aquarium" are common (Váldomiro) d) "There are moments when there is no way to free the faithful. Will, I help another pastor instead of myself?" (Osvaldo). Members "cannot visit other ministries. If they are, they are considered disobedient." (Kaio) e) Pastors asserts that "that it will not work, that the faithful will have to return" (Edmundo). "You are not going; you are under the curse. You won't because I will not let you" (Damião) f) "The person's purchasing power helps in the position he has. People who have better buying power get better positions. ... These people are very coveted" (Humberto)
<i>Risk-taking</i>	Risk-taking manifests itself in: a) the decision to depend on auxiliary pastors; b) proselytizing practices	a) "I have seen many cases like that. Some faithful leave with the dissident pastors and the rest stay with the titular pastor." (Raimundo). The pastor leaves the "church talking to the faithful: I will open another church. Go there to help us. I mean? Competition, right." (Marcelo). "There are pastors who [...] entice leadership. It happened to me. A pastor came here, made friends with people and took 30 people away." (Abelardo)

(continued)

Dimension	Objective manifestation	Illustrative evidence(s)
<i>Autonomy</i>	Autonomy manifests itself in the pastors' set of actions. The selection criteria themselves contribute to autonomous pastors' choices responsible for their enterprises' creation and conduct	b) "Knows that if he starts with many demands, he runs the risk of the faithful not staying" in the church (Marcelo) –

Table 3.

I looked for a believer. Let me ask you something: is there any way you can buy a car for me? I was unemployed. I had no salary. He had. He signed the form and the form was approved.

In the professional sphere, pastors obtain from the faithful the necessary resources for their church's creation and development: "Everything we are currently getting at the church is through the faithful" (Kaio). Teodoro stressed that to build the church, "there must be participation by everyone engaged in this work." However, this mutual aid relationship is only between pastors and faithful. They interact exclusively with members of the same church. Humberto emphasized how the relationship between the faithful and pastors is like "urban tribes." For the pastor, "it is natural to think of the church as a biological family."

Two fundamental pieces of evidence result from this. The first is that the dense network of solidarity is intended only for "faith brothers." Jefferson defended this, as "the priority is always the house." Similarly, "The Bible itself asks us to help the faith household" (Abelardo) and "It is a biblical commandment" (Benedito). The second is that pastors and the faithful form dense social networks coupled under the same religious-congregational collectivity. This coupling has a sociability limit in the church itself. People not embedded in the churches cannot take advantage of the resources created through the ministerial structures. This inability to enjoy the benefits includes family members and other evangelical individuals. Humberto explained that anyone who "is a relative but was not born again, i.e. has not converted to the evangelical religion," is on a different path. According to Humberto, it is possible to "help a relative, but it is impossible to share the burden fully with them, to walk together;" if the relative is not an evangelical, they "are not going in the same direction." Table 4 summarizes the relational dimension and presents the relational coupling/decoupling concepts.

Discussion

Field data suggest some primary findings. As highlighted by [Corrêa et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Pearce et al. \(2010\)](#), pastors seem capable of acting as entrepreneurs. Pastors use elements representative of the five EO personal attributes in the search for their institutions' development. Among the attributes, the clearest among the pastors were proactivity, competitive aggressiveness and autonomy. Such an observation corroborates [Corrêa et al.'s \(2017\)](#) previous reflections. For instance, pastors both attract new faithful to their churches through proactivity and competitive aggressiveness and keep their existing faithful. Consequently, pastors with higher skills in associating different EO attributes should be more able to influence their churches' growth positively.

The second finding is associated with the relational structure. Empirical evidence suggests that pastors achieve a suitable fit between relational coupling/decoupling. By endorsing the possibility that more specific markers can restrict coupling such as the congregational collectivity here emphasized, this study corroborates [Granovetter \(2009\)](#). This study also confirms [Corrêa et al.'s \(2018\)](#) assertions by reinforcing pastors' ability to achieve their faithful a suitable balance in their social structure. Pastors derive essential benefits from this, preventing "uncontrolled solidarity" ([Granovetter, 2009](#)). Pastors specify the solidarity network within the churches' boundaries, undermining the excessive demands of people outside them: "The Bible itself asks us to help the faith household" (Abelardo). Another benefit is that pastors enjoy an intense mutual aid structure, made possible by the strong social cohesion that sustains their faithful ([Granovetter, 2009](#)): "We help each other a lot" (Leonardo). The field evidence suggests the following research proposition:

- P1. Entrepreneurs, whether religious or not, are influenced by EO attributes and the social structure in which they are embedded.

Dimension	Objective manifestation	Illustrative evidence(s)
<i>Coupling</i>	It manifests itself in pastors trying to build and sustain with their faithful cohesive networks of relationships Such a dense structure allows a mutual aid relationship between a) the faithful and b) faithful and pastors. Pastors obtain resources related to the spheres: i) personal and ii) professional	“I have sought to create a church of people with cohesive relationships, which grows firmly” (Benedito). “We help each other a lot” (Leonardo) a) “Here, they are very close” (Zulmira). “When a believer is in need, everyone in the church is willing to help financially and physically” (Teodoro). “Sometimes, what the believer does not have within the family, we provide for him” (Kaio) b) “They help me and I help them” (Leonardo). “Even I needed it myself. They came together and blessed my life. It is no shame for a pastor to say that.” (Abelardo) b-i) “I looked for a believer. Let me ask you something: is there any way you can buy a car for me? I was unemployed. I had no salary. He had. He signed the form and the form was approved.” (Leonardo) b-ii) “Everything we are currently getting at the church is through the faithful” (Kaio). “There must be participation by everyone engaged in this work” (Teodoro) a) The relationship between the faithful and pastors is like “urban tribes.” “It is natural to think of the church as a biological family” (Humberto) b) “The priority is always the house;” “The Bible itself asks us to help the faithful household” (Abelardo). “It is a biblical commandment” (Benedito) c) Anyone who “is a relative but was not born again, i.e. has not converted to the evangelical religion” is on a different path. If the relative is not an evangelical, they “are not going in the same direction” (Humberto)
<i>Decoupling</i>	It manifests in: a) avoiding the possibility of extensive solidarity; b) circumscribing the church benefits to members of such structures; c) inability of family members and other individuals, evangelical or not, to enjoy the church’s resources and benefits	

Table 4.
Network dimensions,
objective
manifestations and
corroborative
evidence

However, field evidence suggests new findings derived from the EO and coupling/decoupling association. One of these findings is related to the social dimension influence (coupling/decoupling) on the behavioral one (EO). Data show that the church’s social structure can influence the pastor’s OE. On the one hand, pastors encourage social cohesion, fundamental to the provision of different resources. On the other hand, they look for, at the same time, to avoid their excessive structural obstruction, harmful to their church’s growth: “Jehovah’s Witnesses can only relate to Jehovah’s Witnesses. They do not mix with anyone. They are closed groups; they do not grow” (Damião). Damião emphasized that, as a church, “it does not open itself up to the market, it does not grow.” To grow, pastors use proactive, aggressive and risky initiatives in the religious context.

Pastors are proactive in converting people, acting in anticipation of competitors (Luu and Ngo, 2019; Rodrigo-Alarcón *et al.*, 2018) and adopt aggressive initiatives when seeking new believers in other evangelical institutions. Fernando, for example, highlighted how “it is

easier to find people who are already believers than to convert external, non-believers.” Finally, pastors take risky actions due to two central sets of practices. The first involves relying on auxiliary-pastor support, considered one of the leading practices responsible for church divisions: “I have seen many cases like that. Some faithful leave with the dissident pastors and the rest stay with the titular pastor” (Raimundo). The second set of practices aims to prevent the loss of members. On the one hand, pastors scold believers who visit other churches. On the other hand, they try to settle their “competitive aggressiveness” to avoid losing the faithful to other churches. Marcelo highlighted this by stating that a pastor “knows that if he starts with many demands, he runs the risk of the faithful not staying in the church.”

Note that the church’s social framework would influence pastors’ entrepreneurial behavior, an important research finding. This paper analyzes how the coupling/decoupling partially affects EO manifestation, assuming its dimensions from a dependent variable. Thereby, it stresses the influence of a strand of social networks on OE, addressing recent calls to study further the value of the association between both approaches ([Diáñez-González and Camelo-Ordaz, 2019](#); [Jiang et al., 2018](#)). Empirical data suggests the following research proposition:

- P2.* Enterprises’ social structure (coupling/decoupling) stimulates religious entrepreneurs’ EO.

Another finding is associated with the behavioral dimension influence (EO) on the relational aspects. Data show that pastors’ EO is also capable of influencing their congregations’ coupling/decoupling. Pastors gain new members for their churches through proactivity and competitive aggressiveness, i.e. through conversion and proselytizing. At the same time, however, this is also due to the innovativeness and competitive aggressiveness that pastors display in preventing the faithful from leaving the church, instigating their congregational networks’ proper densification and inspiring the faithful to restrict their social interactions with the church itself. Pastors encourage the restriction of the faithful’s interactions with the same church members when: teaching them to look for the necessary help from among their “faith brothers” (Cristiano); promoting the faithful’s unity regarding the support necessary for their church’s growth; and preventing members from visiting competing churches; etc [“The shepherds’ greatest fear is their sheep going to another church” (Humberto)]. This finding confirms those of earlier studies in that, although the coupling/decoupling balance is partly a reflection of situations “beyond the control of individuals,” such as the religious-congregational situation, it is also subject to “some marginal manipulation” ([Granovetter, 2009](#), p. 269). Field data suggest the following research proposition:

- P3.* EO attributes (innovativeness, proactivity, competitive aggressiveness, risk-taking and autonomy) influence the coupling/decoupling balance.

Theoretical and managerial implications

Addressing recent claims from researchers who have stressed the value of associating the EO construct and relational dimensions ([Diáñez-González and Camelo-Ordaz, 2019](#); [Jiang et al., 2018](#); [Rodrigo-Alarcón et al., 2018](#); [Suyanto and Pratono, 2016](#)), this study suggests important theoretical implications. The first is that entrepreneurs can influence their networks’ structure by appropriating EO attributes and vice-versa. Evidence suggests that the religious undertaking’s development occurs due to the combination of EO and network resources (coupling/decoupling) and the recursivity and dynamism among its fundamental

components. In seeing this, this article supports the idea that the EO literature would gain strength and explanatory power through a more significant association with the network literature about relational coupling/decoupling.

A second implication relates to the EO construct explicitly. As entrepreneurs can mobilize their social structures, changing them according to interest, we see how the “capacity to adjust networks” could eventually be one of EO’s components. This study endorses [Granovetter’s \(2009, p. 269\)](#) proposition that coupling/decoupling is subject to “some marginal manipulation.” The influence of the EO attributes on the coupling/decoupling balance has shown evidence in this direction in this study. [Figure 2](#) summarizes these reflections, showing the associations between EO and coupling/decoupling.

In summary, [Figure 2](#) shows how the search for churches’ development is cyclical and dynamic. A pastor’s EO influences their church’s coupling/decoupling. Similarly, the institution’s social structure simultaneously affects the pastor’s EO, leading them to respond to the socio-structural imperatives through entrepreneurial attributes. Therefore, this field analysis suggests that understanding the neo-Pentecostal congregations’ development will be better understood if interpreted due to the association emphasized here between EO and networks (coupling/decoupling). In other words, by highlighting EO’s influence on entrepreneurs’ social structure, this article suggests the relevance of the novel studies to combine both pieces of literature’ propositions. The reflections derived from the association between EO and Networks suggest the following research proposition:

- P4.* Ventures’ development trajectory should be more successful when the entrepreneurs take ownership of more EO attributes and the more balanced the social structure is in which they are embedded.

Considering all of the above, the relationship between EO and coupling or decoupling with social networks can serve as mutual recognition of self-fulfilling feedback ([Wadsworth, 2008](#)) that keeps the dynamic system interconnected ([Terra and Passador, 2015](#)). Traditional correlations among such constructs may not offer a better perspective for understanding such a social phenomenon, however, because that kind of social interaction seems to be better understood from a broader perspective that considers recursiveness to be crucial.

The pastors-entrepreneurs search for their church’s development would be due to the influence between:

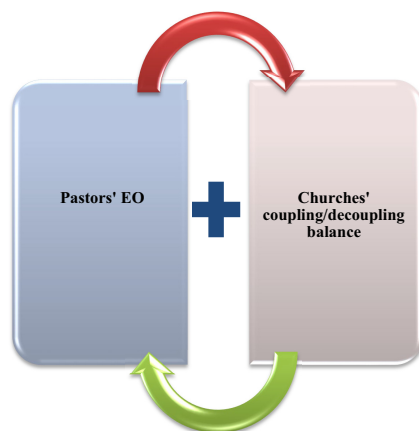


Figure 2.
Associations between
EO and coupling/
decoupling

From a managerial point of view, our findings suggest the relevance of including themes of EO and social networks, specifically coupling and decoupling, in public and private training programs for entrepreneurs. Such training should be aware of personal information and consider how such personal characteristics are embedded in a broader networked social context. For their part, entrepreneurs need to be aware that the characteristics of EO that they develop can generate certain benefits in specific social contexts involving coupling and decoupling.

With reference to the systemic view shown in [Figure 2](#), we conclude that the competitiveness between religious denominations in Brazil reflects the combination of individual and social strategies. Thus, religious entrepreneurs could gain more significant benefits from their mutual association. To attract more attention and gain followers, religious entrepreneurs need to recognize how they can manage the contexts in which they are embedded and understand that individuals become followers of a specific church not only due to the pastor's ability but also to communicate convincing religious arguments or competence in acting entrepreneurially. They become followers also under the influence of coupling and decoupling among social networks. That two-way, integrated relationship between a pastor's EO and the coupling–decoupling balance should be considered because, after all, one simultaneously influences the other.

Limitations and direction for future research

This article has limitations, all of which suggest future research avenues. One of them is the restriction of data to pastors only, limiting the possibility of corroborating the information with other actors involved such as the faithful. A second limitation is the collection of evidence solely through semi-structured interviews. A third limitation is the absence of data proving the projects' performance, preventing the possibility of setting up a relationship between constructs and entrepreneurial performance. Novel studies could cover not only such limitations but also explore new research opportunities. These research opportunities include investigating the religious entrepreneurial context from the paradigms of complexity. Such approaches could expand the understanding of the non-emphasized religious and ethnic particularities of the religious context; to research the religious enterprises' performance, associating this in an explanatory way to EO and networks; to explore in-depth each of the four theoretical propositions just outlined here.

Proposing a research agenda

This section proposes a theoretical research agenda that incorporates and extrapolates the possibility of investigating EO in the context of religious entrepreneurs. [Table 5](#) presents the agenda derived from the association between EO and coupling–decoupling, as well as some recommended research questions and suggestions for related literature.

Conclusion

This article has presented an exploratory means of investigating associations between EO and social networking approaches, demonstrated in an empirical study on pastors–entrepreneurs in relation to coupling and decoupling. In doing so, the article endorses and expands emerging research supporting the importance of including relational dimensions in the construct of EO, particularly by revealing how entrepreneurs who appropriate EO attributes in developing their ventures are influenced by the social structure in which they are engaged. In sum, entrepreneurs' EO influences the social framework of their ventures and that general finding indicates opportunities for novel studies that address the relatively unexplored association between EO and coupling and decoupling.

Table 5.

Proposing a research agenda

Approach	Questions (Q)	Related literature
Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and coupling–decoupling	Q1 How do coupling and decoupling influence the attributes of EO in family businesses? What types of resources do entrepreneurs obtain from tightly coupled family structures?	Estrada-Robles <i>et al.</i> (2020)
	Q2 How does the level of network coupling influence the ability of entrepreneurs to innovate? How do networks support the success of new firms?	Baker <i>et al.</i> (2020)
	Q3 How does the proper balance of the social structure in terms of coupling and decoupling influence how attributes of EO manifest?	Jiang <i>et al.</i> (2018)
	Q4 How does EO influence the acquisition of resources by networks, understood as a dependent variable?	Rank and Streng (2018)
	Q5 How can decoupling allow intermediation between networks and improve access to resources capable of stimulating EO?	Leick and Gretzinger (2020)

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Corresponding author

Victor Silva Corrêa can be contacted at: victorsilvacorrea@yahoo.com.br

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