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Negative emotions of an entrepreneurial career: Self-employment and regulatory coping behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Although we know a great deal about the relationship between self-employment and the experience of positive emotions such as passion, excitement, happiness, satisfaction, and flow, there is some research that suggests that the self-employed may be more susceptible than employees to negative emotions such as stress, fear of failure, loneliness, mental strain, and grief. We draw on the literature on role requirements to develop a model of career pursuit based on individuals' willingness and abilities to regulate these emotions. Using a nation-wide survey of more than 2700 US citizens we show that over and above the effects of positive emotions, the self-employed experienced fewer negative emotions than those who are employed, contingent on their regulatory coping behaviors. We discuss implications of these results for the literature on entrepreneurial emotions.

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1. Executive summary

There is a substantial literature that links self-employment with positive emotional outcomes such as passion, excitement, happiness, flow, and satisfaction. However, while these studies provide considerable information about positive emotions, this does not necessarily inform our understanding of the negative emotions experienced by the self-employed. Positive and negative affect are relatively independent dimensions and individuals can be high or low on both at the same time. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the tasks associated with self-employment could be sources of considerable negative emotions for those that pursue this career path over and above the effects of positive emotions. For example, self-employment is often associated with high levels of risk taking, income and job uncertainty, required work effort, decision autonomy, and responsibility, which yield considerable negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, loneliness, and mental strain.

Drawing on the literature on role requirements and role characteristics, we develop a model of the regulation of the negative emotions of career pursuit and suggest that the self-employed more readily accept the negative emotional consequences of their career choice and/or learn to cope with these emotional consequences. Using a large-scale, nation-wide survey that includes more than 2700 US citizens we show that the self-employed indeed report experiencing fewer negative emotions than those who are employed, and that this difference is magnified if individuals use problem-focused and/or emotion-focused coping tools.

We make several contributions to existing entrepreneurship theory. First, while role differences between employment and self-employment are well established in the literature, there is insufficient theory linking these role differences to the experiencing of emotions. Our result that over and above the effect of "off-setting" motivating factors and positive emotions the experience of fewer negative emotions can explain individuals' decision to pursue self-employment suggests that theoretical models of entrepreneurial motivation and career pursuit should consider negative emotional career outcomes as an explanatory variable.

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Second, to date no theoretical model exists that links career choice (self-employment vs. employment) with the experience of negative emotions at a general level, and identifies contingencies explaining to what extent career choice can translate into emotional experiences. We offer such a model integrating emotions, career choice, and regulatory coping behaviors of individuals. Finally, existing studies have found that regulatory behaviors can help the self-employed to cope with grief after business failure. We provide a more general theory of entrepreneurial coping behaviors suggesting that problem-focused and emotions-focused coping may help the self-employed to balance negative emotions associated with self-employment while their business is ongoing.

Our findings have practical implications because they suggest that the autonomy of self-employment provides individuals with various opportunities to use coping tools effectively in order to regulate negative emotions. Individuals who consider becoming self-employed (as opposed to becoming employees) but hesitate to do so because they fear the potential negative emotional consequences of their choice should be aware that the task characteristics of self-employment provide the preconditions to cope with these emotions effectively. For leaders and managers in a corporate context our results suggest that tools used to cope with subordinates' negative emotions (e.g., after project failures) are even more effective if in addition the work environment for employees is more "entrepreneurial", that is, if employees are granted high levels of decision autonomy enabling them to use coping tools in a way that fits best with their personal way to reduce negative emotions.

2. Introduction

There is a substantial literature that links self-employment with positive emotional outcomes. For example, various scholars (Baum and Locke, 2004; Cardon et al., 2005, 2009; Smilor, 1997) have emphasized that the self-employed often experience high levels of passion — "a consciously accessible, intense positive feeling" (Cardon et al., 2009: 7). Further, self-employment can lead to experiences of excitement, happiness, and flow (Komisar, 2000; Rai, 2008; Schindehutte et al., 2006). Studies have also found that the self-employed display greater levels of job and life satisfaction than those who are employed (Blanchflower et al., 2001; Bradley and Roberts, 2004; Thompson et al., 1992). However, while these studies provide considerable information about positive emotions, this does not necessarily inform our understanding of the negative emotions experienced by the self-employed.

Positive and negative affect are relatively independent dimensions (Mroczek and Kolarz, 1998; Tellegen and Watson, 1999; Watson and Tellegen, 1985) and individuals can be high or low on both at the same time. For example, George and Zhou (2007) found that employees display particularly high levels of creativity when they experience high levels of both positive and negative affect, and Larsen and colleagues described several events that trigger the experience of positive and negative emotions simultaneously (Larsen et al., 2001, 2004). Others have also found that positive emotions do not exclude the experience of negative emotions at the same time (Fong, 2006; Fong and Tiedens, 2002; Williams and Aaker, 2002). This suggests that although self-employment may be associated with the experience of positive emotions, the self-employed may also experience high levels of negative emotions.

Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the tasks associated with self-employment could be sources of considerable negative emotions for those that pursue this career path over and above the effects of positive emotions. Tasks and responsibilities that are specific for self-employed individuals include the screening for, and recognition of, new business opportunities, business planning, acquisition of financial and non-financial resources, managing and leading employees, creative problem solving, and quick decision making in situations characterized by high levels of uncertainty and change (Douglas and Shepherd, 2000; Eisenhardt, 1989). Because of the nature of these tasks, self-employment is often associated with high levels of risk taking, income and job uncertainty, required work effort, decision autonomy, and responsibility (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983; Covin and Slevin, 1991; Douglas and Shepherd, 2000; Wiklund, 1999) which may result in the experience of negative emotions. For example, high levels of job demands can provoke mental strain and dissatisfaction (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983; Harris et al., 1999; Jamal, 1997; Kets de Vries, 1980). Risks and uncertainties about the future of the business can cause fear and anxiety about the owner's own personal future (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983). Further, long working hours of the self-employed can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Akande, 1994; Gumpert and Boyd, 1984; Hannafey, 2003). Moreover, one study found that for many self-employed the responsibility for their business and employees is a burden and causes high levels of stress and mental strain (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983). It can also lead to elevated levels of frustration (Du Toit, 1980) and grief (Shepherd, 2003).

If the negative emotions expected from self-employment are so high, then why would people have this career? Research suggests that entrepreneurs' motivation to overcome such obstacles includes fulfilling their high need for achievement (Collins et al., 2004; Johnson, 1990; Shane et al., 2003) and desire for independence/autonomy (Douglas and Shepherd, 2000), experiencing passion (Cardon et al., 2005, 2009), and gaining considerable financial return from self-employment (Boyd and Gumpert, 1983; Kuratko et al., 1997; Naffziger et al., 1994) which can all yield positive emotions that may more than compensate for the 'negatives' of self-employment. Rather than following an indirect approach of counter-balancing negative with positive emotions, in this paper we directly investigate negative emotions and behaviors to regulate these negative emotions.

Drawing on the literature on role identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002; Ashforth et al., 2000), we develop a model of the regulation of the emotions of career pursuit and suggest that the self-employed more readily accept the negative emotional consequences of their career choice and/or learn to cope with these emotional consequences. Further, our model acknowledges that individuals differ in their regulation of negative emotions and suggests how problem-focused and emotions-focused coping behaviors influence the career-emotions relationship. We test the resulting hypotheses using a large-scale, nation-wide survey that includes more than 2700 US citizens. In testing our theoretical model, we make the following contributions.

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