



From entrepreneurial intentions to actions: Self-control and action-related doubt, fear, and aversion☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 December 2013

Received in revised form 17 January 2015

Accepted 27 January 2015

Available online 7 February 2015

Field Editor: M. Frese

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial intentions

Entrepreneurial action

Self-control

Intention–action-gap

Emotions

ABSTRACT

This study draws on the Rubicon model of action phases to study the actions or lack of actions that follow the formation of entrepreneurial intentions. Concurrently, it examines the roles of self-control and action-related emotions in explaining the intention–action gap using longitudinal survey data (N = 161). The results show that self-control positively moderates the relationship between intention and action, and that it counters the rise of action-related fear, doubt, and aversion. We also find evidence for interaction effects between action aversion, action doubt, and intention strength. Our results signal the importance of studying moderators of the intention–action relationship.

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1. Executive summary

Many people form intentions to start their own business but do little to translate those intentions into actions. Acting upon intentions may be postponed or abandoned because new constraints emerge or the person's preferences change. However, if an aspiring entrepreneur does not take action despite ongoing intentions, potentially fruitful entrepreneurial ventures are not realized. For this reason it is important to understand the so-called intention–action gap and to investigate under what conditions people turn their start-up intentions into actions or fail to do so.

This study builds on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2011/2014) and prior entrepreneurial intentions research (Schlaegel and Koenig, 2014) by drawing on the Rubicon model of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012; Heckhausen and Gollwitzer, 1987) to study the actions, or lack of actions, that follow the formation of entrepreneurial intentions. The starting point for the analysis is that forming a strong intention is only a preliminary stage of successful goal attainment, because a host of subsequent implementation issues remain to be resolved (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006). In this study we focus on volition: how individuals exercise willpower to obtain what they desire plays a key role in dealing with these implementation issues. This analysis focuses

☆ An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the BCERC Conference in June 2013, Lyon, France, and appeared as a full paper in *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship*. This research has received financial support from the Academy of Finland (grant numbers 135696 and 140973).

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on two sets of constructs related to volition: (1) action-related emotions (doubt, fear, and aversion) may cause people to avoid action and willpower will then be required to overcome their stifling effects; (2) self-control is a personality disposition that reflects an individual's capacity to exercise willpower.

The empirical analysis is based on longitudinal survey data from a random sample of the Finnish population. Intentions to engage in start-up activities in the following 12 months and self-control were measured in the first wave. The second survey was administered one year later and inquired about the start-up activities undertaken and the action-related emotions encountered from those 161 individuals who reported a positive (non-zero) intention in the first wave. The results show that self-control positively moderates the relationship between intention and action, and that it counters the rise of action-related fear, doubt, and aversion. In other words, an intention to engage in start-up activity is more likely to lead to subsequent action when an individual has a high level of self-control. Having a high level of self-control also makes it less likely that the person will experience high levels of any of the avoidance-oriented action-related emotions.

These findings offer an insight into when and why entrepreneurial intentions are followed by actions. They also extend intention research by providing new insights into the behavioral processes that follow the formation of an intention to start a business. In practical terms our research highlights the essential role of self-control in the implementation of entrepreneurial intentions, and the importance of applying action knowledge and action planning to avoid action doubt stifling entrepreneurial action.

2. Introduction

Sue has been talking about establishing her own nursery business for some years now. She is in her forties and married with two children. Having completed her master's degree in education, she began working in a municipal nursery school, and became its principal five years later. Yesterday, a friend asked her what happened to her intentions to start her own nursery business. Initially, Sue did not really know what to say; then she recalled how busy she had been in the past few years with her family, work, and volunteering with her local church. Somehow, she never had enough time and energy to get started with her business idea. She also mentioned that when she had thought about pushing ahead with the business idea, she had struggled to see where to start. It also turned out that she found the paperwork required to set up a business daunting and was worried what would happen to her family if the business were not successful.

The fictional example of Sue's case illustrates a relatively common scenario: many people form an intention to start their own business but do little to translate their intention into actions, and that lack of action is not uncommon among aspiring entrepreneurs. Research on nascent entrepreneurship in the United States shows some people lingering for long periods in what Reynolds (2000) referred to as the still-trying phase. One piece of research cites five extreme examples where the prospective entrepreneurs waited nearly 50 years before finally acting on their intentions (Liao and Welsch, 2008, p. 112). By definition, intentions concern future goals and actions, and there is no conflict between intention and a lack of subsequent action if acting upon the intention was deliberately postponed, or if new constraints emerged or preferences changed that led a person to abandon the intention. However, if no action is taken in spite of ongoing intentions, intentions and actions will be at odds with each other. A lack of action then means that potentially fruitful entrepreneurial initiatives are not realized. Entrepreneurial action is not only a necessary condition to get businesses started, but is also important in determining if an attempt to start a new venture will ultimately be abandoned. Research on nascent entrepreneurs shows that those who quit the start-up process will generally have taken more action than those who linger in the still-trying phase. The former will often have prepared for and investigated a new venture before deciding to abandon the idea; whereas the latter group are likely to have taken little action (Carter et al., 1996; Lichtenstein et al., 2007).

In entrepreneurship research, the dominant psychological theories used to predict and explain the emergence of new ventures are Ajzen's (1991, 2014) theory of planned behavior (TPB) and Shapero and Sokol's (1982) Entrepreneurial Event Model (EEM). These models agree that the best way to determine if people will take action to start their own business is to ask them whether they intend to do so. Although numerous studies have examined the formation of entrepreneurial intentions (Schlaegel and Koenig, 2014), research on the intention–action link in the context of new venture creation has emerged only recently (Gielnik et al., 2014; Goethner et al., 2012; Kautonen et al., 2013). These studies indicate that although intentions are indeed a significant predictor of subsequent action, intentions only explain a certain proportion of the variation in the extent of action taken. Intention–action gaps are also found in other behavioral domains (Sheeran, 2002).¹ There is compelling evidence that intention strength is not the only factor predicting the extent of action taken.

This article adds to the emerging understanding of the entrepreneurial intention–action relationship by complementing the study of intentions with constructs related to volition. A behavioral intention represents a person's motivation to perform a behavior, encompassing both the direction (to do X vs. not to do X) and the intensity (e.g., how much time and effort the person is prepared to invest in doing X) (Sheeran, 2002). Regulating the translation of intention into action, however, is also volitional (i.e., how individuals exercise willpower to attain what they desire) (Gollwitzer et al., 1990; Lord et al., 2010). From a self-regulatory perspective, forming a strong intention is only a prerequisite for successful goal attainment, because a host of subsequent implementation issues remain to be resolved (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006).

We extend intention research in the entrepreneurial context by studying the actions (or lack of actions) that follow the formation of intention. We do so by drawing on the Rubicon model of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012; Heckhausen and Gollwitzer, 1987),

¹ Although it is common for intention theories to refer to behavior, we will use the term action, with action being defined as the "fact or process of doing something, typically to achieve an aim" (Oxforddictionaries, 2014). The goal-directed and intentional nature of the behaviors we investigate (Bird, 1988) allows us to refer to these behaviors as actions.

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