



Entrepreneurial inception: The role of imprinting in entrepreneurial action



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ABSTRACT

Recent research highlights that founders' early decisions and the environmental conditions at founding each imprint upon a new venture in ways that affect growth and survival. However, we know much less about how the entrepreneur is imprinted and how the outcome of this imprinting process influences the entrepreneur and the venture. Through semi-structured interviews and content analysis, our study examines entrepreneurs' formative experiences during sensitive periods of transition, which we refer to as *sources of imprint*. We illustrate how these sources of imprint impact entrepreneurial decision making and explain how they guide entrepreneurs' decisions as they progress through their entrepreneurial careers. In doing so, we improve our understanding of how entrepreneurs navigate the entrepreneurial process.

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1. Executive summary

The experiences and decisions through which an organization is created and the conditions under which it begins have non-trivial consequences for its later life (Boeker, 1988; Kimberly, 1979; Stinchcombe, 1965). A burgeoning body of research has explored this important phenomenon by espousing imprinting theory, which highlights the enduring impact of prior history on individual and organizational outcomes. However, the central focus within both the organizational and entrepreneurship literatures concerning imprinting has largely been on the organization. In other words, scholars have concentrated on how organizations are imprinted and what this means for the course of the organization.

In contrast, we focus on the imprinting process for individuals—namely, entrepreneurs. Although some organizational research has focused on the implications imprinting has for individuals and their careers (Higgins, 2005; McEvily et al., 2012), we demonstrate the broader implications of imprinting. Specifically, we explore how the imprinting process influences entrepreneurs' decision making and their selection of current and potentially future opportunities.

Through semi-structured interviews and content analysis techniques, we shed light on entrepreneurs' decision making and their ventures' development trajectories. By doing so, our theoretical contributions are threefold. First, we explore the role of imprinting in entrepreneurial action. We explain how imprinting may be a key mechanism to understand how certain formative experiences, which we refer to as *sources of imprint*, have a lasting effect on entrepreneurial decision making. Second, we build upon prior research to illustrate how different sources of imprint significantly influence which opportunities entrepreneurs select and, more broadly, the way they navigate the entrepreneurial process differently as a result of different sources of imprint. Finally, we consider the importance of educators in promoting entrepreneurial experiences that may guide the development of individuals' paths toward entrepreneurship

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as well as the different educational needs of entrepreneurs with different sources of imprint. Together, our study reveals the importance of imprinting by examining how sources of imprint have a persistent impact on entrepreneurs and their respective ventures.

2. Introduction

A long history of research in entrepreneurship has demonstrated that prior experiences play a critical role in the entrepreneurial process (e.g., Shane, 2000; Westhead et al., 2005). In part, experiences are important because they impact not only what opportunities individuals identify but also how they evaluate, select, and ultimately act upon them (Busenitz and Lau, 1996). Some experiences impart a passing influence on entrepreneurs, while other experiences stick with them, altering the way in which they see and think about the world (Politis, 2005).

Imprinting theory explains how individuals and organizations develop characteristics from experiences during a sensitive period and persistently reflect them despite time passing and the environment changing (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). To date, scholars have shown that imprinting is critical to organizations, including impacting outcomes like venture growth potential (Bamford et al., 2000) and turnover rates (Burton and Beckman, 2007). Scholars have also emphasized the importance of imprinting to individuals, such as by illustrating how early career mentors and peers influence subsequent work choices (Azoulay et al., 2011) or how initial network ties confer persistent advantages to young lawyers (McEvily et al., 2012). Within entrepreneurship, imprinting research has revealed how founding decisions—the choices made at the onset of the firm (DeTienne, 2010)—and founding conditions—the environmental conditions at the firm inception (Boeker, 1989)—impact the firm throughout its life. Together, these efforts demonstrate that what happens during venture founding (or the start of a career) has a persistent impact on the course of that organization (or individual).

Although these efforts have notably contributed to imprinting and entrepreneurship theory, extant research fails to explain how salient experiences and environmental elements (what we refer to as *sources of imprint*) imprint entrepreneurs and how these sources of imprint impact the way entrepreneurs manage their venture(s). Entrepreneurship research has shown that entrepreneurs bring in a set of givens (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities) that are then imprinted on a venture (e.g., Bamford et al., 2000; Boeker, 1988; Johnson, 2007), but it remains silent on how these givens impact entrepreneurs' decision making and the course of their ventures. Largely, research in both the organizational and entrepreneurship literatures has focused on organizations as recipients of the imprinting process and has primarily assumed that imprinting begins at venture inception (see Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). However, it is likely that entrepreneurs are also recipients of as well as contributors to the imprinting process. As such, certain sources of imprint might influence entrepreneurs before they launch their first venture and may persist throughout their entrepreneurial careers, likely impacting their decision making and the trajectory of their ventures.

To address these limitations, we draw from the rich literature on entrepreneurial action and integrate it with imprinting theory from psychology. In so doing, we shift the focus from how the organization is imprinted to a largely understudied element of the entrepreneurial process: how the entrepreneur is imprinted. Specifically, we reveal how certain experiences and elements of the environment (i.e., sources of imprint) impart a lasting and persistent *stamp* on entrepreneurs that is carried with them as they make decisions for their ventures. Thus, we address the following research question: *How do sources of imprint have a lasting impact on entrepreneurs' decision making and their ventures' development trajectories?*

Given the relative paucity of research explaining how sources of imprint influence entrepreneurs and their ventures and our goal of developing new theoretical insights in this area, we selected a qualitative approach to study how sources of imprint impact entrepreneurial action. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs and content analyzed their verbalized responses. Additionally, we followed up with each of our entrepreneurs a year after the original interviews to see how their future actions unfolded.

With this approach, our study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we demonstrate that imprinting may be a key mechanism to understand how specific sources of imprint have a lasting influence on entrepreneurs. In line with calls for additional research to uncover the origins of how entrepreneurs think about opportunities (Grégoire et al., 2011), we adopt the relatively underutilized lens of imprinting to show that sources of imprint affect entrepreneurs' current and future decision-making processes as well as their opportunity selection. Second, we extend efforts emphasizing the importance of context and alignment in opportunity recognition (Grégoire et al., 2010) and evaluation (Haynie et al., 2009; Williams and Grégoire, forthcoming) by showing that the sources of prior knowledge (including when and under what conditions the knowledge was obtained), in addition to the knowledge itself, have an enduring impact on entrepreneurial action. Finally, we contribute to research in entrepreneurial education by exploring how prior experiences guide entrepreneurs' perceptions of who they are and what actions are most critical to their definition of success. Specifically, we illustrate the importance of entrepreneurial educators by showing that the sources of entrepreneurial learning can significantly impact how entrepreneurs make decisions and their priority of motives. Overall, we contribute to entrepreneurial decision making and opportunity selection by exploring how sources of imprint have a lasting impact on entrepreneurs and their ventures.

3. Imprinting

Building on the work of Stinchcombe (1965), organizational research on imprinting has highlighted the enduring impact of prior history on organizational outcomes by demonstrating how organizations (or individuals) assume elements of their environment that persist well beyond the founding phase (Milanov and Fernhaber, 2009). In their examination of imprinting, most scholars have considered three elements of imprinting: sensitive periods, stamps, and persistence (see Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). Therefore, in line with prior work, we define imprinting as a time-sensitive (i.e., occurs at sensitive stages of life) learning process (i.e., a stamping process whereby the focal entity reflects elements of its environment) that initiates a development trajectory (i.e., produces persistent outcomes).

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