



Social identity and the transition to entrepreneurship: The role of group identification with workplace peers[☆]

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ABSTRACT

What role does social identity play in the transition from employed work to entrepreneurship? It was expected that social identity affects the cognitive processes that, according to the theory of planned behavior (TPB), underlie the formation of entrepreneurial intentions. Focusing on academic scientists' intentions to commercialize research knowledge, we investigated social identity (scientists' group identification with their workplace peers in academia) as a moderator in the TPB model. Our hypotheses were tested in a sample of 488 German scientists. The data revealed that entrepreneurial intentions were predicted by attitude, social norms, and perceived control and that group identification was negatively associated with perceived control. Multi-group structural equation modeling further showed that group identification moderated the TPB-intention link. Scientists with low group identification based their entrepreneurial intentions not so much on social norms and attitudes but on their self-initiative and control beliefs. Among scientists with high group identification, in turn, entrepreneurial intentions were mainly a function of social norms. These results, in sum, illustrate the long-neglected importance of identification with, and social cohesion within, peer groups at the workplace for the transition to entrepreneurship.

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The majority of entrepreneurs engage in enterprising activity after a period of employment in established organizations (Nanda & Sørensen, 2010). Thus, a better understanding of factors determining the transition from organizations to entrepreneurship is crucial for theory building on the enterprising individual and contributes to the ongoing scholarly and political debate on how to foster entrepreneurial societies (The World Bank, 2010).

This study examines the role of social identity in the transition from employed work to entrepreneurship. Although social identity (which refers to the aspect of a person's self-image that is derived from membership of social groups) is generally deemed a crucial shaper of vocational choices (Gottfredson, 1981), we still know too little on the effect of social identity in the specific field of entrepreneurial career choices (Falck, Heblich, & Luedemann, in press). How does, for example, a person's group identification with workplace peers affect his or her intentions to engage in entrepreneurship? In answering this question, we focus on the early phase of the transition process to entrepreneurship, namely on the development of an innovative business idea (Shane &

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Venkataraman, 2000). This early phase has long-lasting effects on subsequent entrepreneurial performance (Boeker, 1989; Stinchcombe, 1965) and is an important research topic in entrepreneurship research (Reynolds, 1997).

In this study, we hypothesize that social identity (in our case scientists' group identification with their workplace peers in academia) does not directly affect entrepreneurial intentions (scientists' intention to commercialize research knowledge by developing an innovative business idea) but critically influences the cognitive processes that, according to the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), underlie the intention formation. In what follows, we first discuss the relevance of entrepreneurial intentions and innovative business ideas for entrepreneurship research and then develop the hypotheses to be tested in this study.

Entrepreneurial behavior and intentions

It is one of the most basic principles in innovation research that, in today's knowledge-based economies, competitive advantage mainly derives from new ideas (Audretsch, 2007). One important mechanism through which new ideas diffuse into the market sphere is *entrepreneurship* (Schumpeter, 1934). Shane and Venkataraman (2000) defined the field of entrepreneurship research as the study of "how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated, and exploited" (p. 218). According to this definition, at the core of entrepreneurship stands the innovative business idea, that is "the complex of products/services, knowledge, competencies, market, and technologies that are necessary to run a business" (Grandi & Grimaldi, 2005, p. 826; see also Ardichvili, Cardozo, & Ray, 2003). Audretsch (2007) further stressed that not only is the success of a business rooted in the quality, newness, and potential of its business idea, but the success of whole "entrepreneurial societies" depends on the development and exploitation of innovative business ideas. Taken together, *the commercialization of new knowledge by developing an innovative business idea* (the transformation of knowledge into marketable products and services) can be seen as prototypical entrepreneurial behavior.

Entrepreneurship research moreover acknowledges the intentionality of entrepreneurial behavior (Bird, 1988; Krueger & Carsrud, 1993). Acting entrepreneurially is something that people choose or plan to do (Shaver & Scott, 1991). The most proximal predictor of the decision to engage in entrepreneurial behavior is seen in *entrepreneurial intentions* (Bird, 1988). Simply put, these are cognitive representations of a person's readiness to engage in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial intentions signal how intensely one is prepared and how much effort one is planning to commit in order to carry out entrepreneurial behavior. Even if people may have significant potential, they will refrain from making the transition into entrepreneurship when they lack the intentions (Krueger & Brazeal, 1994; Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000). Accordingly, entrepreneurial intentions represent a central variable for researching the entrepreneurial process such as the transformation of knowledge into an economic outcome (Krueger et al., 2000; Lee, Wong, Foo, & Leung, 2009; Obschonka, Silbereisen, & Schmitt-Rodermund, in press).

Combining these arguments on the importance of business ideas and entrepreneurial intentions for the study of entrepreneurship in general, in this study we investigated scientists' intentions to develop an innovative business idea on the basis of own research knowledge (Shane, 2004). We focused on such an academic entrepreneurship context as a suitable arena for the study of entrepreneurial intentions and the development of innovative business ideas due to the overarching presence of entrepreneurial potential here, namely new research knowledge. Such new knowledge is a hotbed for innovative business ideas (Audretsch, 2007), and its entrepreneurial exploitation is a powerful ingredient in the economic innovation process (OECD, 2003).

Hypotheses

As noted earlier, our overall expectation was that social identity (group identification) would not directly affect entrepreneurial intentions but influence the cognitive processes that, according to the theory of planned behavior (TPB), underlie the intention formation process. In the following, we thus first draw from the TPB and derive a set of hypotheses on the proximal factors underlying entrepreneurial intentions (attitude, norms, and perceived behavioral control). Then we turn to our main research question, the effect of social identity.

Theory of planned behavior

The TPB offers a coherent, parsimonious, and highly-generalizable framework for understanding and predicting behavioral intentions of different kinds, which makes it a good choice when studying antecedents of behavioral intentions in the context of entrepreneurship (Krueger et al., 2000). The core assumption of the theory of planned behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) is that behavioral intentions (which in turn are seen as the most proximal and important predictor of the target behavior) are an additive function of three latent factors: attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. Past research showed that the TPB is able to predict substantial amounts of entrepreneurial intentions in general (e.g., intentions to start a business). Given the general and basic nature of the TPB approach, we expected this framework to also apply in the specific context of academic entrepreneurship with its special focus on scientists' active participation in the entrepreneurial exploitation of new research knowledge (Shane, 2004). In order to ensure matching between the TPB variables examined in our study and the specific target behavior of interest (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), each of the TPB variables we studied referred to the development of an innovative business idea (e.g., "My personal attitude toward participation in the development of a business idea to commercialize my own research is that this is...").

Attitudes reflect the individual's enduring evaluation – positive or negative – of engaging in a particular behavior. Existing literature suggests that academic scientists allocate their efforts and time toward entrepreneurship if they have a favorable

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