



Entrepreneurial intention as developmental outcome[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 January 2010

Available online 13 April 2010

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial intention

Big Five

Personality

Control beliefs

Competence growth

ABSTRACT

What predicts adults' entrepreneurial intentions? Utilizing a cross-sectional sample of 496 German scientists, we investigated a path model for the effects of entrepreneurial personality (Big Five profile), control beliefs, and recalled early entrepreneurial competence in adolescence (early inventions, leadership, commercial activities) on two types of entrepreneurial intentions (conditional and unconditional intentions). As expected, entrepreneurial personality and early entrepreneurial competence on the one hand and both types of entrepreneurial intentions on the other were associated. Findings of structural equation modeling further revealed indirect effects via control beliefs (e.g., mediation effects). The results highlight the importance of a life span developmental approach in entrepreneurship research and support the idea that entrepreneurship can be promoted early in life. The findings are discussed against the backdrop of the economic and societal values that entrepreneurship has in today's societies.

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Introduction

Promoting entrepreneurship may be vital for the success of today's societies, which face enormous economic and social challenges (Audretsch, 2007). Recently, policymakers stressed that this promotion, in general, should start early in life and that public measures should target the education of "the next wave of entrepreneurs" by fostering youths' early entrepreneurial competence (e.g., basic business knowledge or leadership) (European Commission, 2006; World Economic Forum, 2009). However, although such activities seem to partly follow a life span developmental perspective (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Elder, 1998), entrepreneurship research to date has rarely addressed early antecedents of entrepreneurial activities (e.g., early entrepreneurial competence in adolescence). In contrast, *entrepreneurial personality traits* have received considerable attention in the entrepreneurship literature. However, whereas some researchers emphasized the central role of personality (Rauch & Frese, 2007), others argued that this may be misleading as more proximal factors such as behavioral characteristics are disregarded (Gartner, 1989). One way to combine both views is to investigate proximal variables that mediate the effects of personality traits on entrepreneurial outcomes. However, such mediation models have rarely been studied so far. In view of these research gaps, this study sought to examine early entrepreneurial competence in adolescence and entrepreneurial personality traits as predictors of entrepreneurial intentions and, in addition, to investigate underlying mediation effects.

Entrepreneurial intentions

Humans are active agents in their own development (Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999). They do not engage in entrepreneurship by accident; they do it intentionally as a result of choice (Krueger, 2007). Accordingly, *entrepreneurial intentions* (defined as the

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at Babson College Entrepreneurship Research Conference, 2009, and at 11th International Institute on Developmental Science, Dornburg, Germany, 2008.

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conscious state of mind that directs personal attention, experience, and behavior toward planned entrepreneurial behavior; Bird, 1988) are seen as the strongest proximal predictor of entrepreneurial activity and serve as a central and widely studied outcome variable in contemporary entrepreneurship research (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000; Lee, Wong, Foo, & Leung, in press). This study investigated entrepreneurial intentions among scientists by referring to their intention to engage in the commercialization of their research knowledge through venture foundation.

According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), behavioral intentions can be conditional or unconditional. In contrast to unconditional intentions (e.g., “I intend to participate in the founding of a company to commercialize my research”), conditional intentions refer to the condition under which individuals would develop such intentions (e.g., “If my research had marketing potential, I would intend to participate in the founding of a company to commercialize the research”). We examined these two aspects of entrepreneurial intentions separately. While targeting conditional intentions implies the advantage of “adjusting” for possible determinants of entrepreneurship that are beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on unconditional intentions provides the opportunity to study manifest intentions to start a business, to really engage in entrepreneurship.

What predicts entrepreneurial intentions?

Previous research suggests that *personality* is an important predictor of entrepreneurial intentions (Crant, 1996), which is consistent with general theories on career choice, such as Holland's (1997) assumption that “the choice of a vocation is an expression of personality” (p. 7). Recent meta-analytic findings indicate that the Big Five traits (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism) are relevant for entrepreneurship (Rauch & Frese, 2007). In contrast to previous entrepreneurship research, which focused on linear relations between various single personality traits and entrepreneurial outcomes, we suggest that the personality as a whole may be worth more than the parts and, thus, consider individual patterns of Big Five traits rather than singular traits to be of importance for entrepreneurial intentions. This assumption draws from a person-oriented approach (Magnusson, 1998), which figures prominently in contemporary psychology research. As studies indicate that individuals high in extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness and low in agreeableness and neuroticism are more likely to choose an entrepreneurial career than others (Schmitt-Rodermund, 2004, 2007), we expected this profile to positively predict (conditional and unconditional) entrepreneurial intentions (Hypothesis 1).

The notion that early precursors in childhood and adolescence are linked to entrepreneurial outcomes has been around in the entrepreneurship literature for many decades (Dyer, 1994). Almost 50 years ago, David McClelland (1961) suggested that children's (age-appropriate) entrepreneurial competencies should predict the development of adults' entrepreneurial mind-sets. However, empirical studies are scarce. Nonetheless, drawing from a famous prospective longitudinal study of gifted children that was started in the 1920s—the so-called Terman study—Schmitt-Rodermund (2007) found early entrepreneurial competencies (defined by leadership and inventive behavior in adolescence) to have an indirect positive effect on engagement in entrepreneurship in adulthood via early entrepreneurial interests in adolescence and entrepreneurial career goals. These results corresponded to those of cross-sectional studies with current samples (Schmitt-Rodermund, 2004). Given these arguments and findings, early entrepreneurial competence (early inventions, leadership, and early commercial activities, measured from retrospective reports) were expected to positively predict (conditional and unconditional) entrepreneurial intentions in adulthood (Hypothesis 2).

According to Schmitt-Rodermund's (2004, 2007) entrepreneurship studies, adolescents' early entrepreneurial competence is also a manifestation of their entrepreneurial personality profile. She consistently found that adolescents with an entrepreneurial Big Five profile exhibited higher levels of early entrepreneurial competence. Accordingly, we expected a positive correlation between the entrepreneurial personality profile (measured in adulthood) and early entrepreneurial competence in adolescence as viewed in retrospect (Hypothesis 3).

Entrepreneurship researchers (e.g., Krueger & Carsrud, 1993) have argued that Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB) serve as a suitable theoretical framework for understanding the impact of distal variables (e.g., personality) on entrepreneurial intentions. The TPB has received strong empirical support (Armitage & Conner, 2001) and was earlier utilized as the theoretical framework for the prediction of entrepreneurial intentions (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000). The TPB assumes that attitudes, social norms, and perceived control are the most proximal predictors of behavioral intentions. From these three predictors, we chose to put our main focus on perceived control (e.g., *entrepreneurial control beliefs*) as a mediator for three reasons. First, control beliefs play an important role in career development (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Second, they represent a key variable in entrepreneurship research, in terms of both predictors and mediators (Zhao, Seibert, & Hills, 2005). Third, control beliefs lend themselves as a focus construct for potential interventions (Wilson, Kickul, & Marlino, 2007). Drawing from Skinner, Chapman, and Baltes (1988), we examined two indicators of entrepreneurial control beliefs, namely agent-ends beliefs and agent-means beliefs (see also Skinner, 1996). *Agent-ends beliefs* refer to the perceived control over a desired outcome (e.g., ends-related self-efficacy beliefs), whereas *agent-means beliefs* refer to the perceived availability of potential means needed to produce the outcome, such as personal means (e.g., ability or effort), contextual factors (e.g., support from others), or random factors (e.g., luck). Studying such means implies the advantage of looking beyond ends-related control beliefs by focusing on “pathways through which control is exerted” (Skinner, 1996, p. 552). This further allows a realistic instead of illusionary sense of control to be studied. Note that Simon, Houghton, and Aquino (2000) found illusion of control (e.g., overestimation of one's entrepreneurial ability) to positively predict the decision to start a venture. However, illusion of control is a cognitive bias. Thus, the authors argue that although such an illusion seems to stimulate engagement in entrepreneurship (e.g., due to lower risk perception), it may represent a barrier to entrepreneurial success due to biased decision-making. Individuals with an illusionary sense of entrepreneurial control may lack the relevant means one needs to actually solve

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