



Passion for what? Expanding the domains of entrepreneurial passion[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial passion helps coordinate cognition and behavior of entrepreneurs, providing the fire that fuels innovation, persistence, and ultimate success. However, our knowledge of the sources of passion is limited and focuses primarily on activities predetermined by scholars, rather than those generated by entrepreneurs themselves. Using a phenomenological approach, we conduct an inductive qualitative study of 80 entrepreneurs and analyze their oral histories to explore the sources of entrepreneurial passion as described by entrepreneurs. Our discovery process suggests six major sources of entrepreneurial passion: passion for growth, passion for people, passion for the product or service, passion for inventing, passion for competition, and passion for a social cause. This extends prior research that focuses on passion toward a more limited range of activities.

1. Introduction

The popular and academic press have argued convincingly that passion is an important aspect of entrepreneurship (Bierly et al., 2000; Bird, 1989; Chen et al., 2009). Passion increases entrepreneurs' dedication and commitment to their ventures, their persistence in pursuing venture-related goals and activities, and their ability to get and stay fully engaged in their actions (Cardon et al., 2009; Cardon and Kirk, 2015; Drnovsek et al., 2016; Vallerand et al., 2003). Entrepreneurial passion is also contagious to other key stakeholders of the firm, such as employees (Breugst et al., 2012; Cardon, 2008), and investors (Cardon et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2009; Mitteness et al., 2012; Murnieks et al., 2016).

Despite all of the recent attention towards entrepreneurial passion, one particularly important question that has not been fully addressed is what makes entrepreneurs passionate. The literature surrounding entrepreneurial passion has almost universally focused on passion towards "activities" (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2012). A variety of activities relevant to the entrepreneurial context have been investigated (i.e., activities related to inventing, founding, developing, etc.), and authors have uncovered numerous interesting relationships between these activities and both antecedents to and consequents of entrepreneurial passion. However, this concentration on activities ignores the possibility that the source of an entrepreneur's passion may be something else entirely. In discussing how the construct of "passion" is used more generally in psychology, Vallerand (2015) notes that, "...the object of one's passion can be an activity, an object, another person, or even an abstract concept, idea, cause, or goal." (p. 28, emphasis added).

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Thus, many other options exist besides activities as targets for passion.

Another prevalent problem with extant work is that the two predominant scales used in empirical work on passion (Cardon et al., 2013; Vallerand et al., 2003) first choose a particular object, such as activities associated with an entrepreneurial role, and then ask respondents the extent to which they are passionate for that object. These scales typically gauge both the strength of one's positive feelings and the extent to which that particular activity is central to one's identity (Cardon et al., 2013), or the extent to which that activity is internalized harmoniously and obsessively into one's self-concept (Vallerand et al., 2003; Hsu et al., 2014). While this body of work has shed tremendous light on the role of passion in entrepreneurship, we must recognize that this empirical approach involves scholars assuming that specific entrepreneurial activities are the key factor to gauge entrepreneurial passion. By doing so, scholars restrict the range of options available to entrepreneurs, and pre-determine the potential objects of their passion, rather than allowing respondents to freely indicate what particular aspects of entrepreneurship serve as the focus of their passion. As such, existing scales are ill-suited to assess passion for other viable targets such as products, ideas, or people, and because of this, we do not have a good understanding of the full range of objects that may ignite an entrepreneur's passion. Given the prevalent evidence of diverse motivations among entrepreneurs, it is time to question our focus on activities and instead explore the variety of targets that may be the source of passion for entrepreneurs.

The question of what entrepreneurs are passionate about is an important one because the object of one's passion can have important implications for the types of behaviors entrepreneurs engage in, such as persistence and creativity (Cardon et al., 2009; Cardon and Kirk, 2015), and the outcomes of such behaviors, such as firm performance (Drnovsek et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding a broader potential set of potential targets of passion might help inform our understanding of entrepreneurs' behaviors and performance outcomes for themselves, their firms, and their stakeholders.

To delve further into the sources of entrepreneurial passion, we conducted an inductive qualitative study of 80 entrepreneurs as part of a larger oral history project. The inductive approach was used because an "individual's interpretation of an experience is an essential part of the experience itself (Patton, 1990)" (Cope, 2005: 168). The researchers' job is to explore and reveal the essential types and structures of such experiences with the individuals (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) so that better understanding of the phenomenon – here entrepreneurial passion – can occur. Our goal was to discover how entrepreneurs themselves experience and make sense of their passion and its sources. We note that our goal is not to develop a new typology of objects of entrepreneurial passion, but rather to suggest that a broader set of domains of passion should be considered in our research, and to encourage greater flexibility in research designs to allow for entrepreneurs to indicate the object, as well as the strength and nature, of their passions.

2. Sources of passion in entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial passion has been defined as involving positive and intense feelings experienced from engagement in activities associated with roles that are meaningful to the self-identity of entrepreneurs (Cardon et al., 2009). Recent theoretical and empirical work has suggested that the object of passion is important and that, "studies that ask what passion is or what it does must begin by addressing *passion for what*" (Cardon et al., 2009: 525, emphasis in original). Indeed, recent empirical work finds differing relationships between passion for specific domains of entrepreneurship and outcomes such as persistence (Cardon and Kirk, 2015), bricolage behaviors and firm survival (Stenholm and Renko, 2016), venture growth (Drnovsek et al., 2016), and employee commitment (Breugst et al., 2012).

Despite acknowledgement that the focus of passion matters, the dominant approach undertaken in extant research still focuses on passion for activities, which we suggest is a limitation to our collective knowledge concerning entrepreneurial passion. A review of prominent journals for papers focusing on entrepreneurial passion (see Table 1) indicates the overwhelming emphasis (86% of the articles) on "activities" as the target for entrepreneurial passion. We note that a few papers have suggested the focus of entrepreneurial passion could extend beyond "activities". For example, scholars hint that entrepreneurs may be passionate about the venture they have created (Bird, 1989; Cardon et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2009), or particular opportunities they are pursuing (Branzei and Zietsma, 2003; Ruskin et al., 2016), regardless of the venture involved. This variety in targets alludes to the possibility that the sources of entrepreneurial passion may range beyond activities related to entrepreneurial roles, yet the dominant empirical and theoretical approaches, and even the definitions themselves, still focus on passion for activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

In this study, we analyze interview data from 80 entrepreneurs across the US to explore the sources of entrepreneurial passion. These interviews were conducted between 1995 and 2009 as part of an ongoing project to collect oral histories of entrepreneurs (Glauser, 2009). Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990: 169) was used to select entrepreneurs. This process involves contacting knowledgeable individuals and reviewing data sources that can lead to interesting, information-rich cases. The companies involved are typically at least three years old, have reached viability, and are growing. The final sample represents entrepreneurs with a variety of gender (60% male), age and ethnic backgrounds (84% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 4% African American, 3% Native American, 3% Asian), who operate firms of varying size and maturity in a broad range of industries (see Table 3 for details, reported with results below).

Interviews were conducted by phone or in-person, and were recorded. They were typically 30–120 min long (with an average of 60 min). The interviews were semi-structured, with the entrepreneurs being asked to tell their story "*from the time you conceived your*

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