ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS AN IDENTITY BRIDGE: RESPONSES TO DISCONTINUOUS LIFE EVENTS (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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INTERACTIVE PAPER

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS AN IDENTITY BRIDGE: RESPONSES TO DISCONTINUOUS LIFE EVENTS

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Principal Topic

Entrepreneurship confers a sense of control and meaning uniquely positioned to address the fear and hopelessness often associated with a discontinuous life event – a situation that fundamentally challenges a valued and closely held conceptualization of identity. We investigate this proposition in the context of an entrepreneurship training program, and a sample of soldiers and marines disabled by war. We consider how and why entrepreneurship can represent a mechanism through which individuals can internalize a new conception of self, in response to an event that shatters one’s fundamental assumptions of identity.

Method

We employ a multiple-case study design based on replication; analysis across cases serves to identify emerging conceptual insights (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). Each participant in this study was forcibly retired from military service [involuntary work role-transition] as a result of their disability. Semi-structured protocols direct interviews conducted with each subject 14-months after completing an entrepreneurship training program. This setting and sample are appropriate because 1) each participant faced overwhelming trauma, 2) identity change is important and ongoing given that the routines, symbols, and artifacts, associated with military culture have powerful impacts on the identity of individual, and 3) each expressed aspirations for entrepreneurship. Our sample includes two groups representing contrasting outcomes with regard to identity change (Yin, 2003).

Results and Implications

Based on similarities and differences [within and across cases], data reveals insights into the motivations for entrepreneurship as a vocational path. We find that the traumatic loss both removed obstacles to the new vocational identity (pull), and revealed obstacles that channeled (push) identity motivations. We find a ‘push’ toward entrepreneurship as a function of physical limitations that are perceived as ‘closing the door’ to some employment vocations. More interestingly, our data suggests a second type of push motivation that manifests itself as a perceived limit on traditional employment rooted in trauma, coping with trauma, and ongoing identity change. The extended period of dependence on others and lack of control is manifest as a desire for autonomy and control with regard to future vocation options; closing the door on some vocational opportunities in the same way that physical limitations do, and pushing individuals toward entrepreneurship as a vocation.

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