RETHINKING THE RECOGNITION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF MORAL INTENSITY (SUMMARY)

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RETHINKING THE RECOGNITION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF MORAL INTENSITY

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Principal Topic

Sustainability entrepreneurs are seen as key actors in facing contemporary structural problems and supporting the creation of a more sustainable society. How these entrepreneurs recognize, develop and exploit venture opportunities represents an important research question. While researchers have addressed this issue by applying models of opportunity recognition derived from studying “traditional” entrepreneurs, there remains a gap in terms of the role of non-economic considerations. This paper addresses this gap by highlighting the role of moral intensity (MI) in the recognition and pursuit of sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial opportunities. We argue that current conceptions overlook the nature and magnitude of the sustainability issue in question. In the absence of high levels of MI, entrepreneurs may not activate their knowledge relevant to the issue at hand and, furthermore, may not find it compelling to address the issue in the name of sustainability.

Method

We test these predictions in an experimental design. Its purpose was to examine opportunity intention in the different combinations of high/low MI and high/low prior knowledge of a sustainability issue. The data were collected from an online experiment involving 87 business school students, who randomly responded to one of four survey versions containing different combinations of the manipulated variables. We operationalize MI using Jones’s (1991) issue-contingent model, by which its six components were manipulated to create scenarios that are aimed to trigger high and low MI perceptions of a given issue. We operationalize and manipulate prior knowledge by giving some of the participants pertinent information about a sustainability issue. Finally, we measure opportunity intention based on the likelihood of undertaking several immediate actions to pursue an identified opportunity.

Results and Implication

Results show that the MI of the sustainability issue moderates the relationship between prior knowledge and opportunity intention. Participants with prior knowledge would be intent to pursue an opportunity only to the extent that they faced high level of MI. This model brings to light the relevance of the sustainability issue in itself in producing variance across entrepreneurs in their ability to recognize opportunities for sustainable development. By incorporating MI into the discussion, we encourage explicit recognition and theorizing around the moral aspects of entrepreneurship, in which sustainability entrepreneurs are most likely to differ from their “traditional” counterparts.

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