AUTONOMY DYNAMICS (SUMMARY)

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**Principal Topic**

Freedom and constraints of freedom are at the heart of small business motivation and practice. Autonomy (or independence or freedom) motivated small business starters and owners need to balance their autonomy wishes with the demands of the business environment that they face. This study questions the idea that business ownership automatically provides autonomy (as a lived experience), and instead posits that autonomy-motivated small business owners have to work actively to attain and maintain autonomy. The aim of this study is to uncover strategies that small business owners use to navigate autonomy-related challenges. Its second aim is to derive a process model of autonomy.

**Method**

The research design utilizes a qualitative methodology, showing 38 small business owners a range of vignettes that depict autonomy-related tensions of the kinds mentioned above. The owners are asked to give advice to the protagonists in the vignettes, and to relate their own stories with regard to autonomy-related challenges.

**Results and Implications**

Customers are perceived to be the main potential constraint of autonomy, business partners are typically seen as a solution to autonomy-related challenges, and high levels of perceived autonomy go together with high responsibility and constraint ratings. Whether a business owner actively experiences autonomy is not best assessed by asking for the degree of decisional freedom, but rather whether that degree of freedom is voluntarily chosen. This implies that a distinction can be made between currently exercised (CE), temporarily sacrificed (TS), and involuntarily lost (IL) decisional freedoms.

Based on that distinction, a model of autonomy dynamics is derived. Business founders start out in the CE, TS or IL space, depending on, for example, a lack of dependence on the financial revenues, the degree of customization, and whether business ownership emerges out of necessity. Various movements between the three spaces are depicted, such as a temporary swing from CE to TS because of the stage of the business or the importance of an assignment or order; or a movement from CS to TS to IL because of financial pressure or destructive conflict between business partners, with the inverse movement in case of financial success and successful cooperation. Overall, the actual exercise, temporary sacrifice, or involuntary loss of autonomy is a function of power vis-à-vis the business environment.

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