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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF OBSERVATION IN THE ENTREPRENEURIAL PROCESS (SUMMARY)

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≈ SUMMARY ≈

**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF OBSERVATION IN THE
ENTREPRENEURIAL PROCESS**

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Principal Topic

This paper extends understanding about socio-cognitive frameworks of entrepreneurial learning (Cope and Down, 2010; Kempster and Cope, 2010; Ofstein and Renko, 2011). In particular, it builds upon the socio-cognitive framework of Bandura (1977) to generate insight into processes of observational learning and how these relate to entrepreneurship. While Bandura's (1977) work has been linked with particular outcomes of observation such as entrepreneurial intentions (Mungai and Velamuri, 2011; Ofstein and Renko, 2011; Scherer *et al.*, 1989) or self efficacy (Wilson *et al.*, 2007), we argue that Bandura's (1977) framework is equally appropriate to generate understanding about the processes associated with outcomes.

Method

Guided by the research question *what is the role of observational learning in the entrepreneurial process?*, a qualitative life course research methodology was used to collect data about the learning processes (Giele and Elder, 1998) of sixteen entrepreneurs from various backgrounds and industries. In the initial stages of the research, participants were asked to draw a timeline to illustrate - in a chronological way - who the "most significant people" had been on their entrepreneurial journey (Kempster, 2009; Rae and Carswell, 2001). Participants were then later invited to participate in face-to-face calendar interviews (Belli and Callegaro, 2009). These individual interviews allowed us to explore in-depth the relevance and impact each person included in his/her illustration had on the entrepreneur and the process each respondent was immersed in. Data analysis used life course research procedures. Each participant was treated as a case where all his/her observations were analysed using life charts (Benjamin *et al.*, 2008; Silverman, 2000).

Results and Implications

Data patterns reveal that in the entrepreneurial context, observational learning occurs within particular domains: three learning domains prior to start-up (Home, School and Workplace) and four post start-up (Home, Business, Peers and Public Figures). This paper shows that three dimensions - person, model and environment - influence entrepreneurial observation, although with varying emphasis for each learning domain. Indeed, the emphasis is on model and environment prior to start up and on the person post entrepreneurial decision. The implications of this work reinforce the need for further development of entrepreneurial learning theorising from a socio-cognitive perspective (Cope and Down, 2010; Ofstein and Renko, 2011). In addition, this work suggests that observational learning processes differ from prior to post start up in terms of sources, motivations and learning mechanisms.

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