

6-13-2015

THE ENTREPRENEUR'S MASQUERADE: REFLECTING AND ENACTING IDENTITY (SUMMARY)

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Recommended Citation

Jimenez, Bertha T. (2015) "THE ENTREPRENEUR'S MASQUERADE: REFLECTING AND ENACTING IDENTITY (SUMMARY)," *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 16 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/fer/vol35/iss16/21>

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≈ SUMMARY ≈

**THE ENTREPRENEUR'S MASQUERADE:
REFLECTING AND ENACTING IDENTITY**

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Principal Topic

Over the last decade, there has been growing interest entrepreneurship, a movement supported by universities that develop programs, including the Student Business Plan Competitions (SBPCs), to encourage the development of entrepreneurs. According to the organizers, these programs should do more than develop technical skills. In fact, past research shows that to motivate students to explore entrepreneurial opportunities, they must first feel that they are entrepreneurs, i.e. have developed an entrepreneur identity. However, prior research has mostly focused on individuals already pursuing, and hence little is known about key factors that initially lead individuals to make that decision. In this paper, I aim to understand the factors that influence the individual – factors that encourage the enactment or acquisition of an entrepreneurial mindset as part of their identity. I will use an SBPC as my setting, and I analyze the journey that an aspiring entrepreneur undertakes. Along the journey, participants reflect on their own transition for assuming, developing or enriching an entrepreneurial identity.

Methods

I conducted a two-year ethnographic study of the NYU Stern SBPC to investigate the different actors, practices and activities. For the first year, I performed participant observations by joining a team and going through the competition's process. I coupled this with 63 interviews of various stakeholders. In the second year of my study, I followed four teams participating in the competition and held bi-monthly meetings with one of the competition's organizers. I also asked five participants to keep a weekly journal in order to understand their perspective.

Results and Implications

After an exploratory analysis of my data, I turned to the literature on identity and two conceptual frameworks seemed to be relevant: role transition and social identity theory. My study shows that SBPCs are designed to mimic the entrepreneurial field, thus, providing a safe place for participants to experiment with their identity. SBPCs not only provide access to typical resources that an entrepreneur needs, but also give access to actual entrepreneurs who as role models exert influence on their identities. Moreover, they interact with diverse actors, and these social interactions are key in helping them shape and understand their own identity.

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