TO BE OR NOT TO BE: CONTINGENT IDENTITIES OF ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURS (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

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Principal Topic

Academic entrepreneurship and the commercialization of university-based science are important sources of technological innovation underlying economic and social development. The structure of science remains strongly gendered, and substantial efforts are being made to understand why women are less likely than men to pursue academic careers in science and engineering disciplines. In contrast, little effort has gone into exploring differences between men and women scientists in whether they pursue entrepreneurship. We do not, for example, know whether the same barriers that seem to keep women from pursuing science also affect their perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of becoming entrepreneurs. We extend recent work in founder identity theory by asking: How do identity processes shape similarities and differences in academic entrepreneurship among men and women?

Method

We conducted a grounded theoretical study of academic entrepreneurship in Spain. Our sample included 48 individual academic entrepreneurs, more than half of whom were women. Our interviews focused on processes that led these academics to entrepreneurship as well as patterns of behavior and experiences that ensued. We treated each entrepreneur as a case and used cross-case comparison as our primary analytic approach to inducting theory.

Results and Implications

Our findings describe strongly gendered paths in pursuing academic entrepreneurship and reveal distinct approaches to managing multiple identities. We find that some scientists pursuing entrepreneurship did not view this as taking on a new or incongruent role, but instead saw it as an enhancement of their academic role. Constructing identity prototypes that included both scientific and entrepreneurial elements, they viewed themselves as part of an “in-group” that produced greater scientific and social value than either non-entrepreneur scientists or non-scientist entrepreneurs. Both men and women engaged in these efforts, but the identities salient to women were more complex than those for men, and women therefore devoted more effort to constructing congruent identities. Our results suggest that existing explanations of how founders’ multiple social and role identities come into play and existing models of how entrepreneurial choice is shaped by social structure, remain deeply androcentric.

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