THE ENTREPRENEUR-ACTIVISTS: CHALLENGING UNSUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY
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Principal Topic

The resolution of social and environmental concerns in an economy over time can be partially attributed to entrepreneurial action (Dean & McMullen, 2007). However, emergent entrepreneurial ventures that present new ways to tackle these issues are likely to face institutionalised organizational fields and a potentially hostile reception from incumbents, making it difficult to gain legitimacy and survive (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). To successfully drive change, entrepreneurs need to address the “contradictory values, assumptions and goals” they face in practice (Egri & Herman, 2000). This study proposes to extend insights into sustainable entrepreneurship by focusing on the attitudes and actions of entrepreneurs engaged in this landscape. In particular, why do these individuals choose entrepreneurship as a way to bring change? How might they leverage their position to challenge unsustainable business practices?

Method

Exploratory, semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs who employ terms such as “sustainable”, “green”, or “ethical” to describe their ventures were conducted. Four entrepreneurs who articulated a vision to tackle what they see as unsustainable practices by existing business were selected to be case studies for this research. They encompass the “transparently observable process of interest” (Eisenhardt, 1989). Further interviews were conducted with these entrepreneurs and representative employees, clients, suppliers, and competitors, and additional documents were collected. The analysis followed a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1989) combined with revisiting existing theories in line with “back and forth” inductive theory building (Van Maanen et al. 2007).

Results and Implications

The entrepreneurs studied express disillusionment with the world of mainstream business and pursue reformist agendas (Egri & Pinfield, 1996) by establishing for-profit ventures. The entrepreneurs seek to communicate a principled but non-preachy message. In doing so, these entrepreneur-activists create a space for various stakeholders to engage in “civilized rebellion” against less sustainable alternatives.

The findings reveal insights into how some entrepreneurs set about negotiating a role for themselves as an activist capable of transforming business practices for greater sustainability. This supports and expands the concept of “sustainable entrepreneurship”: beyond the pursuit of opportunities arising from market failures, motivated entrepreneurial actors are driving change by demonstrating the feasibility of concurrently making a difference and a profit.

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