ENTREPRENEURIAL INCEPTION: THE ROLE OF IMPRINTING IN ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTION (SUMMARY)

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ENTREPRENEURIAL INCEPTION: THE ROLE OF IMPRINTING IN ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTION

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Principal Topic

Prior experiences are important because they impact the way in which entrepreneurs think, which in turn, influences the choices they make (Busenitz & Lau, 1997). A burgeoning body of research explores the relationship between how entrepreneurs think and the identification, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities (Haynie, Shepherd, & McMullen, 2009; Simon, Houghton, & Aquino, 2000). Although important, these studies have largely ignored the experiences, events, and idiosyncratic factors that predate entrepreneurs’ efforts and action, and how they may influence how entrepreneurs think about opportunities: now and in their envisioned futures (Grégoire, Corbett, & McMullen, 2011). By drawing from the literature in entrepreneurial action and identity and integrating it with theory on imprinting from psychology, we address the question: Which spheres of influence have a lasting impact on entrepreneurs’ decision-making and their ventures’ development trajectories?

Methods and Key Propositions

We selected a qualitative approach to study how spheres of influence impact entrepreneurs’ thinking. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-five entrepreneurs that focused on those salient experiences that led individuals to pursue entrepreneurship and launch their current venture(s). We explored how these origins influenced current and future decision-making. Then, by employing content analysis techniques, we recreated a timeline of how entrepreneurs viewed the past, and how entrepreneur-specific salient spheres of influence affect how they think about entrepreneurial action in the present and their envisioned futures.

Results and Implications

Our results suggest that entrepreneurs’ salient spheres of influence vary along three identities (Founder, Inventor, and Developer) which parallel those in the extant literature (cf. Cardon et al., 2009). Specifically, entrepreneurs of each type had different spheres of influence that impact why they started their current businesses (e.g., the influence of family and friends, technology, or prior work experience), who they turn to for decision making (e.g., family, employees, or nobody), and the development trajectory of their ventures (e.g., growth-seeking, opportunity-seeking, or non-pecuniary motives). In short, we show how different spheres of influence impact entrepreneurs’ paths toward entrepreneurial action. We find that these spheres not only led entrepreneurs to identify certain opportunities but also imprint entrepreneurs to guide their current and future decision-making processes.

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