

Budding Entrepreneurs: The Effects of Parental Role Models

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This paper addresses the effects of parental role models on the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Learning Theory, this paper explores the following three variables as mediators to the relationship 1) attitude toward business ownership, 2) perceived family support, and 3) entrepreneurial self-efficacy. By addressing strategic actions at the firm-level, this study has the ability to influence vital entrepreneurial tasks such as growth and profitability.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, strategic actions, parental role models

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial firms represent an increasingly dynamic, productive force in the economy and reside at the forefront of adaptation and growth of new markets (Gavron, Cowling, Holtham, & Westall, 1998). Small firms contribute significantly to economic growth and economic prosperity for well-developed countries (Birch, 1987). Such economic growth is a direct result of the creation of new firms and the strategic actions of entrepreneurs managing existing firms. Because of the social and economic value of entrepreneurial enterprises (Birch, 1987; Schumpeter, 1934), models leading to an improved understanding of the determinants of entrepreneurial strategic actions represent a significant contribution to the literature.

Previous research has identified that childhood experiences, particularly parental employment, are associated with an increased proclivity to entrepreneurial work roles and decisions (e.g., Krueger, 1993; Matthews & Moser, 1996; Morrison, 2000; Ireland, Hitt, Camp, & Sexton, 2001; Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Drennan, Kennedy, & Renfrow, 2005; Colombier & Masclet, 2008). This paper extends such research by exploring the relationship between parental role models and the strategic actions of the second-generation entrepreneur. It is through previous research findings that we know parental role models have the ability to influence the occupational decisions of their offspring; however, in an effort to better understand this relationship, it is imperative that we, as researchers, address the mechanisms through which this relationship is supported. By addressing the strategic actions of entrepreneurs, and exploring beyond nascent entrepreneurial intentions, this study has the ability to influence vital entrepreneurial tasks such as growth and profitability. It can also assist educators in the structuring of entrepreneurship curriculum; enable business practitioners interested in encouraging the entrepreneurial mindset in youth; benefit other individuals interested in facilitating entrepreneurial strategic actions through supportive mentoring relationships; and enlighten parents regarding the impact they have on their children's entrepreneurial actions.

It is important for the entrepreneurship literature to look at strategic decisions and actions at the firm level because they lead to growth and profitability—the principal goals of entrepreneurial businesses

(Olson, 1987). Past research has used the entrepreneur as the primary source of information (e.g., Busenitz and Barney, 1997; Ndemo and Maina, 2007) for strategic decisions of an organization, and actions are a result of such decisions. According to Covin and Slevin (1991), firm-level analysis is imperative for future models of entrepreneurial research. It can be argued that the effectiveness of an entrepreneur can be measured by assessing the performance of his or her firm; or that the effectiveness of the firm is based on the behaviors of the entrepreneur/individual. Covin and Slevin state, “admittedly, individual-level behavior on the part of the entrepreneur may affect an organization’s actions, and in many cases the two will be synonymous” (1991: 13).

The intentions of this paper are to address the following research questions. First, using Social Learning Theory, what is the relationship between parental role models and each of the following: 1) attitude toward business ownership, 2) perceived family support, and 3) perceived entrepreneurial self-efficacy? Additionally, what relationship does each of these variables (attitude, family support, and self-efficacy) have with the strategic actions of the entrepreneurial firm, using a Theory of Planned Behavior lens? Specifically, do attitude, family support, and self-efficacy have a mediating effect on the relationship between entrepreneurial parental role models and the strategic actions of the second-generation entrepreneur?

Theoretical Background

Several researchers (e.g., Carsrud & Johnson, 1987; Sexton, 1987; Scherer, Adams, & Wiebe, 1989) have brought to the forefront the importance of adopting “well-supported theoretical frameworks” from various academic fields to assist in conceptually developing the entrepreneurial stream of research. Both Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) are well recognized as organizational psychological frameworks currently being used in the entrepreneurship literature (Segal, Borgia, and Schoenfeld, 2005). Thus, while additional theories are briefly addressed in the following paragraphs, Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Learning Theory create the theoretical framework of this paper.

Several theories coming out of the entrepreneurship literature pertain to behaviors, intentions, and other process models (see Segal et al., 2005), but the two most dominant are Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior and Shapero’s Model of Intentions (see Krueger, Reilly, and Carsrud, 2000, for a comparison of the two models). The Theory of Planned Behavior was used for this article because it goes beyond the scope of career intentions to address more specific entrepreneurial behaviors. In the last three decades, research has supported the use of Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior as a foundational model for predicting actual behavior (i.e., Krueger, 1993; Kikul, Wilson, Marlino, & Barbosa, 2008); additionally, Kolvereid (1996) demonstrated that the Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior framework is a solid model for explaining and/or predicting entrepreneurial behaviors.

The Theory of Planned Behavior is grounded in Social Learning Theories, Expectancy-Value Theories, and Attribution Theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Expectancy-Value Theories were created to explain and predict individual attitudes based on beliefs and values (Fishbein, 1963). Attribution Theory deals with the way people attribute, explain, or perceive the behaviors of themselves and the behaviors of others (Heider, 1958). Because Social Learning Theory is used and agreed upon throughout the literature as a foundation for exploring role model influence (e.g., Boyd and Vozkis, 1994; Scherer et al. 1989a), it will be used in this paper as a theoretical basis for looking at the impact of entrepreneurial parents.

Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior was developed from the previous work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). This theory (TRA) suggested that people who evaluated the proposed behavior with a positive attitude and felt that significant others wanted them to perform the behavior would be more motivated to ultimately perform the intended behavior. TRA argued behavioral intention as the outcome variable, but several researchers critiqued the link between intention and actual behavior stating that intention could not be an exclusive determinant of behavior without conditions (Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw, 1988). Thus, in 1985, Ajzen proposed The Theory of Planned

Behavior, which added the new component of “perceived behavioral control,” overcoming many of the criticisms of TRA and going beyond the prediction of behavioral intentions to actual behavior.

The Theory of Planned Behavior has three motivational factors—also known as pillars or antecedents—which influence behavior. The first, attitude (or personal attitude) is the degree to which an individual has a positive or negative personal valuation about the intended behavior (Ajzen, 2001; Autio, Keeley, Klofsten, Parker, & Hay, 2001; Kolvereid, 1996). The second, subjective norms, measures the perceived social support of performing (or not performing) the intended behaviors. The final pillar is perceived behavioral control. This construct refers to an individual’s perception of the ease or difficulty of fulfilling the intended behavior.

Building on Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior, this paper proposes that the development of entrepreneurial capital – cognitive, environmental, and behavioral factors that facilitate entrepreneurial behaviors – is associated with intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Drawing on earlier research (e.g., Dunn & Holtz-Eakin, 2000; Hundley, 2006; Lentz & Laband, 1988), it is proposed that such transfer of knowledge will affect second-generation entrepreneurs in three main areas: attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This study will address entrepreneurial businesses with a single individual making the decisions of the firm.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT) proposes that through the observation of others, referred to as role models, learning can occur. The emphasis of entrepreneurial socialization (Cooper, 1989) is grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which serves as an explanation of entrepreneurial behavior (Scherer et al., 1989b). An individual’s socialization occurs in a family setting, transmitting social norms, language, and educational aspirations—while shaping career decisions (Bandura, 1977). As a result of the child’s observation, a variety of response patterns are applied to social cues; thus, observable “habit hierarchies” (also known as personality or enduring characteristics of behavior) are formed (Scherer et al., 1989a).

Social Learning Theory is particularly concerned with the cognitive, environmental, and behavioral factors that affect personality development. An investigation by Scherer et al. (1989a) found that the presence of an entrepreneurial parent, serving as a role model, was positively associated with increased training and education aspirations, self-efficacy, and expectancy of an entrepreneurial career preference. Additionally, individuals with parental entrepreneurial role models were perceived as higher performers and were found to be significantly different from individuals who did not possess an entrepreneurial role model. A study by Wiebe and Scherer (1987) also demonstrated the effects of parental entrepreneurial role models on personality development. Specifically, second-generation entrepreneurs with a parental role model were higher in achievement motivation, risk-taking propensity and innovation, and had a stronger internal locus of control when compared to individuals who did not have this type of primary role model to observe. This research stream points to the impact of parental role models in the upbringing of practicing entrepreneurs, and goes to show that behaviors thought to be associated with an entrepreneur seem to be affected by role model exposure (Brockhaus & Horwitz, 1986; Hisrich & Brusich, 1984). According to Scherer et al., “the process of observational learning, with its emphasis on behavioral models and socialization, may help to explain the impact of parental entrepreneurial role models on the budding entrepreneur’s behavioral development” (1989a: 57). Thus, with a foundation in Social Learning Theory, this paper will use Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior as a lens to explore the relationships between parental role models, the mediating variables (attitude, perceived family support, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy), and the strategic actions of the entrepreneurial firm.

Literature Review

Strategic actions are defined as “the pathway through which a concept or idea is moved from the invention stage to its positioning in a competitive arena” (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson, 2001). A firm’s strategic actions can be viewed in the following two knowledge domains: exploration, the creation of new ideas or knowledge; and exploitation, the ability to leverage knowledge of a firm for commercialization or the creation of new organizational processes (Miller, Bierly, & Daly, 2007). Exploration is most likely to

result in a long-term maximization of firm success, while exploitation will likely maximize profits in the short-term, therefore presenting a trade-off (March, 1991). Other benefits and costs associated with exploration include the increased likelihood of a sustainable competitive advantage, higher costs, increased risks for the firm, and slow development or refinement of the skills and processes related to the current competencies of the firm (Miller et al., 2007). Exploitation has potential costs as well; namely, the potential to become experts in obsolete areas, or to get good at things no longer valued by customers (March, 1991). Exploration and exploitation are components of strategic actions that can lead to profitability and growth for an entrepreneurial firm.

Ireland, Hitt, Camp, and Sexton state that strategic actions “provide a foundation for long-term competitive success for firms of all types competing in multiple countries across several different market economies” (2001: 23). In a world that increasingly revolves around change, firms in all sectors and industries must make strategic decisions wisely in order to survive; thus, the strategic actions of an entrepreneur are typically aimed at finding new markets or “competitive space” in which the business can grow and increase profitability (Ireland, Hitt, Camp & Sexton, 2001).

Proposition 1a: *Attitude Toward Business Ownership will be positively associated with the Strategic Actions of the entrepreneurial firm.*

Proposition 1b: *Perceived Family Support will be positively associated with the Strategic Actions of the entrepreneurial firm.*

Proposition 1c: *Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy will be positively associated with the Strategic Actions of the entrepreneurial firm.*

Parental Role Models

A role model is defined as, “a person considered a standard of excellence to be imitated” (Wright, Wong & Newill, 1997: 53). Role models are individuals who are looked up to and valued by others. Common role models include local heroes like firemen, teachers, and family members—particularly parents (Conger, Williams, Little, Masyn, & Shebloski, 2009). This paper focuses specifically on parental role models in entrepreneurship. The Scherer studies (1989a & 1989b) concluded that the performance of the role model’s business operation, whether a success or failure, was not as important as simply having a role model; and that the association with a role model was sufficient for developing the desire to become an entrepreneur. Thus, for purposes of this paper, parental role models will be discussed as the entrepreneurial mother and/or father and the extent of their influence. Sub-components in the measurement of this construct include the ability of each parent (mother and father) to serve as a leader or model to the child and to others.

The use of SLT in previous research emphasizes that socialization occurs within families as a way to aid children in accepting the necessary societal roles and behaviors (Brim, 1968). Role models can serve as a social comparison or referent whereby individuals compare their own abilities and actions to that of their role model, in order to create an image of what is possible in their future (Buunk, Piero, Griffioen, 2007; BarNir, Watson, & Hutchins, 2009). Role models have the ability to serve as a resource that provides information and support because they are individuals whose opinions we value (Bandura, 1986; Scherer et al., 1989a; Rivera et al., 2007; BarNir et al., 2009; BarNir & McLaughlin, 2009). Individuals learn of their possibilities, of the “right” way to do things, and of how to obtain resources from their role models (Scherer, Brodzinski & Wiebe, 1990; BarNir et al., 2009; BarNir & McLaughlin, 2009). Furthermore, in the context of Entrepreneurship, approximately 70 percent of individuals have at least one entrepreneurial role model (Scherer et al., 1989a).

For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the theoretical underpinning of intergenerational influence (IG) as developed by Mead (1934). IG suggests that the effects of past behavior can be explained by mechanisms such as prior family business experience (Carr & Sequeira, 2007; BarNir & McLaughlin, 2009). The effects of entrepreneurial parents suggest an intergenerational transfer of knowledge and the development of the human capital necessary for entrepreneurial tasks (e.g., Lentz & Laband, 1988; Dunn

& Holtz-Eakin, 2000; Hundley, 2006; BarNir & McLaughlin, 2009). Individual self-development occurs through a continuous process of reflection and subsequent actions; this process, in turn, stimulates attitudes and behaviors that people express in their interactions with others and their business decisions (Carr & Sequeira, 2007). Substantial research supports the theory of IG influence on subsequent behavior (e.g., Hoge, Petrillo, & Smith, 1982; BarNir & McLaughlin, 2009); and has specifically provided evidence that parental work experiences have significant effects on children—they internalize their parents’ behaviors as acceptable societal norms (Menagham & Parcel, 1995).

Proposition 2a: *Exposure to Parental Role Models will be positively associated with Attitude Toward Business Ownership.*

Proposition 2b: *Exposure to Parental Role Models will be positively associated with Perceived Family Support.*

Proposition 2c: *Exposure to Parental Role Models will be positively associated with beliefs of Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy.*

Attitude Toward Business Ownership

Ajzen (1988: 4) defines attitude as, “a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event;” and attitude toward business ownership entails “a mental position or emotional feelings about becoming a business owner.” Such attitudes can be influenced by numerous exogenous variables like demographics, social values, and personality. As an entrepreneur attempts to evaluate possible strategic actions, he or she will develop an attitude regarding business ownership decisions. Because this construct is attitude specific to business ownership, it only has one dimension; thus, there are no sub-components.

Early socialization to entrepreneurial endeavors can also contribute to the forming of values and attitudes toward business ownership (Light and Bonacich, 1999). As depicted in Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior, it is the formation of expected values through such socialization that lead to the formation of an attitude toward the behavior. Generally speaking, individuals will have a more positive attitude toward business ownership, and the strategic action decisions involved in continuing their entrepreneurial business, if they have been socialized by people important to them—often family, close friends, and/or role models (Carr and Sequeira, 2007). For example, Dick and Rallis (1991) in their research on the theory of career choice emphasized that an individual’s beliefs or attitudes regarding a career are influenced by past experience as well as the attitudes and expectations of ‘socializers’ or role models within their environment. It is a widely held view that the development of entrepreneurial-related attitudes is influenced by family background, childhood experiences, exposure to others in business, and previous job experiences (Morris and Lewis, 1995). Influencing agents found within an individual’s environment include the strong ties that exist in parental role model relationships.

Proposition 3a: *Attitude Toward Business Ownership will mediate the relationship between Parental Role Models and the Strategic Actions of the Entrepreneurial firm.*

Perceived Family Support

Perceived family support is concerned with the likelihood that important referent family members (i.e., parental role models) will approve or disapprove of performing a particular behavior. According to Carr and Sequeira (2007), children’s self-identities are built through a reflective and action-oriented socialization process. In the reflective appraisal process, role models communicate appraisals of the target individual’s behavior, which are then used by that individual to better understand who they are and their behaviors. Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) initiated this line of reasoning stating that reflected appraisals are filtered through an individual’s self-perceptions.

Dalton and Holdaway (1989) found that many entrepreneurs started entrepreneurial ventures during their youth, perhaps as early socialization in a family business. Such socialization at a young age contributes to the formation of subjective norms. When an individual is confronted with these subjective norms, they must weigh them in terms of their personal motivation to comply with the social norms created. Thus, the expectations or social norms created by family, close friends, and role models play an important factor in entrepreneurial behavior and decisions (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000). For example, Oyer (1992) found that individuals who were not surrounded by supportive family became discouraged and ultimately did not proceed with the entrepreneurial business venture. The sub-components of this measurement scale are support received, support provided, and family intimacy.

Proposition 3b: *Perceived Family Support will mediate the relationship between Parental Role Models and the Strategic Actions of the Entrepreneurial firm.*

Perceived Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy

The theory of self-efficacy stems from the work of Bandura (1986, 1997) on social learning theory and represents the belief in one's ability to execute an intended act and the belief that one is personally capable of implementing or engaging in an intended behavior. More specifically, self-efficacy is defined as "...belief in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands..." (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Self-efficacy pertains to beliefs regarding one's capabilities for the successful implementation of specific goals or tasks, which can be varied and extend to multiple areas within a specific task domain (Bandura, 1986; 1997; Gist, 1987). In the context of the present study, the focus is on entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), which is the perceived capability of an individual regarding the performance of functions necessary in effectively accomplishing specific entrepreneurial roles or tasks (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994). Stated differently, ESE is a specific form of efficacy beliefs targeted at entrepreneurial behaviors. Relevant entrepreneurial tasks were adapted from Chen, Greene, and Crick (1989) consisting of the following sub-components: marketing, innovation, general management, risk management, and financial management.

Previous research suggests that the presence of an entrepreneurial parent increases entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Kickul et al., 2008). Entrepreneurial self-efficacy is developed over time and influenced by internal and external factors like upbringing, economic circumstances, personality, and values (Cox, Mueller, & Moss, 2002). Therefore, exposure at a young age makes children more aware of the rewards and obstacles present in entrepreneurial tasks. As children observe the entrepreneurial tasks completed by their parental role models, they build confidence in their ability to complete the tasks and assume an entrepreneurial role.

According to Bandura (1992), self-efficacy can be enhanced through mastery experiences and/or modeling, whereby opportunities allow individuals to gain confidence when experiences and role modeling are prevalent. Mastery experiences are crucial in increasing perceptions of self-efficacy in specific task domains (Cox, Mueller, & Moss, 2002) and commonly referenced as "learning by doing." Modeling entails social persuasion, positive encouragement, and/or feedback from role models; all of which have been found to enhance self-efficacy (Cox et al., 2002).

Proposition 3c: *Entrepreneurial Self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between Parental Role Models and the Strategic Actions of the Entrepreneurial firm.*

DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is to explore the means by which parental role models impact the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms through a Social Learning Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior approach. Results are expected to depict that parental role model influence serves as an important intergenerational influence on the strategic actions of second-generation entrepreneurs. With the social and economic value of entrepreneurial firms, this paper contributes to the literature by exploring

variables that will increase our understanding of the determinants of strategic actions that small businesses pursue. According to Van Ryn and Vinokur (1990), attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control unveil numerous aspects of behavior that serve as research paths for understanding actions and making efforts to change them.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings have implications that can inform both theory and practice. First, the study extends previous research on the influence of entrepreneurial parental role models by exploring the relationship with the strategic actions. By addressing firm-level strategic actions, this study has the ability to influence the entrepreneurial goals of profitability and growth. Using a sample of established entrepreneurial firms provides 1) information on the processes underlying entrepreneurial organizations where a single individual makes the decisions of the business, and 2) serves to answer the call to explore role model influence beyond start-up activities and into the strategic decisions of existing entrepreneurial firms (Carr & Sequiera, 2007).

The implications of this study extend to practitioners as well, and may be of particular importance to educators when considering entrepreneurial curriculum. For instance, university course material should include information on mentoring and encouraging entrepreneurial careers. Strong mentoring relationships with business owners interested in encouraging the profession, and consultants who council and provide support to entrepreneurs, may serve as an alternative means for building the skills and abilities some individuals receive from their self-employed parental role models. In the university realm, students could be paired with these encouraging entrepreneurs for internships or course projects. Supportive entrepreneurial professionals could focus on the experiences necessary to assist interested individuals in building an entrepreneurial attitude, gaining family support for their endeavors, and controlling their behaviors. Active involvement in a mentoring relationship between established business owners making strategic action decisions and aspiring entrepreneurial students could be beneficial for both parties involved (Van Auken, Fry, & Stephens, 2006).

Limitations and Future Research

This paper has three major limitations. First, because the study is exploratory by nature, it does not include a comprehensive model. A predominance of past research suggests a mediating effect between the observational learning from role models and the subsequent entrepreneurial behaviors (e.g., Scherer et al., 1989a, 1989b; Krueger, 1993; Ireland et al., 2001; BarNir et al., 2009). While it is recognized that other variables may play an important role in mediating and/or moderating the relationship between parental role models and the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms, the intentions of this paper were to explore and shed light on the some variables impacting the relationship. Once the relationships have been empirically explored, a clearer image of the effects should emerge and a more comprehensive model should be developed.

The second limitation involves the use of individual- and firm-level variables in the same model. However, it is important to note that the firm-level variable (strategic action) is all perception-based. Because these are perceptions of actions taken at the firm level, and based on a specific definition, it is more difficult to be biased. The strategic actions did or did not occur, and the respondent was responsible for that decision; thus, if any bias exists, it would be minimal. As mentioned in the introduction, previous research has shown that perception based measures are acceptable for measuring entrepreneurial decisions and actions at the firm level (e.g., Busenitz and Barney, 1997; Ndemo and Maina, 2007). Like using CEOs as a proxy for knowing the most about top-level decisions of a corporation, the entrepreneur knows the most about the top level decisions (i.e. strategic actions) made regarding their small business enterprise. Since the goals of an entrepreneurial organization are profitability and growth (Olson, 1987), analysis at the firm level is imperative. Therefore, future research should consider using event studies or case studies and create vignettes that document the strategic actions taken.

Finally, although previously used in the literature, strategic actions may not be fully encompassed by the exploration and exploitation activities of the firm proposed by Miller et al. (2007). Future research

should address the dimensions and items proposed analyzing reliability and the validity of these measures. By qualitatively analyzing detailed explanations of entrepreneurs' strategic actions, future researchers may be able to identify additional items in the entrepreneurial realm that relate to the exploration and exploitation activities of the firms. Additional research may also identify other dimensions and items more reliable for measuring strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms.

In closing, the primary goal of this paper was to explore the effects of parental role model exposure on the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms. This is particularly important in a globally competitive environment because the intersection between entrepreneurship and strategic management sheds light on the variables that promote growth and profitability, and the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms create a context for exploration and exploitation activities (Hitt et al., 2001). Other objectives included an exploratory investigation of the following mediating variables which may impact the relationship: attitude toward business ownership, perceived family support, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Thus, the implications—both theoretical and practical—warrant further investigation as they have the ability to extend current knowledge on the strategic actions of entrepreneurial firms.

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