

The Relationship between Self-perceptions, Behavior Tendencies, and Entrepreneurial Propensity

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Abstract

Entrepreneurs are widely considered vital to healthy economies, yet despite the voluminous research into the endogenous influences that inspire them, much remains unknown. Further, to date, there appears to be no dominant theoretical lens through which to view these influences and, some researchers have abandoned this line of investigation entirely, citing too many variables as obstacles to viable conclusions. The core premise of our theorizing is, while planned behavior models such as Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), offer only a partial view of variables influencing entrepreneurial propensity, strategically expanding their parameters can corral other crucial factors and strengthen the models for this domain of research. Drawing from both empirical and conceptual streams of literature, we nuance TPB by extending the model with four additional dimensions. The objective is to contribute to the continuing dialogue of the evolution of entrepreneurial inclination. A new theoretical model is introduced and both additional implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behavior, Entrepreneurial Propensity, Innovativeness, Proactiveness, Risk-tolerance, Work Ethic

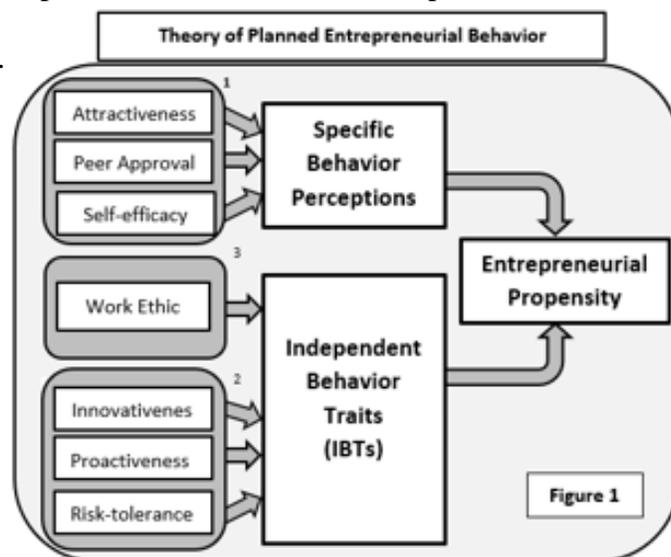
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Introduction and Literature Review

Entrepreneurship is widely acknowledged as a driving force in global economic development and job creation (Kumar, 2014; Mitra, 2008) and the United States depends on an industrious workforce as well as motivated entrepreneurs as an important source of innovation, employment, productivity, and growth (cf. Suárez-Álvarez & Pedrosa, 2016). Scholars recognize the importance of entrepreneurship and have dedicated considerable research to the phenomenon and yet, much remains to be discovered about the influences on their decisions to embrace entrepreneurship as a career option (Murnicks, Mosakowski, & Cardon, 2014; Vanevenhoven & Liguori, 2013). Compared to the total workforce, only a small number of people choose to become entrepreneurs. Given the potential risks to personal finances, alternative careers, personal relationships, and professional reputations, these individuals likely possess strongly positive perceptions about entrepreneurial engagement, as well as a set of unique behavior traits that enable them to manage the inevitable challenges they will face. The behavior traits are referred to as Independent Behavior Traits (IBTs) and they represent the general inclination of an individual to embrace and engage in tasks and challenges with enthusiasm, energy, creativity, and risk tolerance. They are referred to as "Independent" since they are the core behavior tendencies of an individual. For example, one individual may appear to be generally industrious in approaches to new challenges, while another may appear to be more casual and laidback. These general tendencies are autonomous from any specific task or challenge; that is they exist independently. In other words, while behavior perceptions may influence contextual behavior tendencies, they do not affect IBTs.

Investigations into the perceptions and independent behavior traits (IBTs) of entrepreneurs have proven to be a formidable endeavor and consensus of how these coalesce to

drive entrepreneurial intentions, remains elusive. Over thirty years ago, some scholars suggested that, due to the extensive range of variables, the attempt to identify predictive influences on potential entrepreneurs was a moribund endeavor (cf. Gartner, 1988). Nevertheless, a theoretical approach to categorizing influences on planned behavior was introduced in 1991 by Icek Ajzen. While Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was not specifically designed to study entrepreneurialism, it provided a valid foundation for the process and it serves as a platform on which we build the proposed theory. It is theorized that regardless of whether an individual possesses the independent behavior traits associated with an activity such as entrepreneurship, specific behavior perceptions of that activity will moderate the individual's propensity to pursue the option. For example, an individual may have entrepreneur-associated IBTs, however forces acting on negative perceptions of entrepreneurship evolving from the presumed disapproval of his/her reference group or lack of self-confidence in the ability to complete the required tasks associated with the activity, may dissuade engagement. Likewise, an individual with positive perceptions of entrepreneurship and yet lacking in the crucial IBTs, may also be dissuaded from entrepreneurial engagement. We propose that entrepreneurial propensity is driven by a combination of both positive perceptions of the behavior and the possession of the behavior-associated IBTs. (See Figure 1).



Ajzen, 1991₁ Bolton, 2012₂ Miller, 2002₃

Previous research into behavior perceptions has relied heavily on Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (1991; 2002) (Tornikoski & Maalaoui, 2019). The perception-driven theory does not consider an individual's independent behavior traits. Instead, it frames behavior influences with a three-dimension perception-centered model: initial opinion of the attractiveness of the behavior (*Attitude*), the perceived opinion of others within the individual's reference group toward the behavior (*Subjective Norm*), and the imagined degree of difficulty of engaging in the behavior (*Perceived Behavioral Control*).

Each of these perceptions play a unique role in influencing behavior intentions and they can act disparately on behavior decisions. For example, an individual may have a positive perception of a behavior (Attitude), however their opinions might be dissuaded by perceiving a negative reaction to the behavior by their reference group (Subjective Norm). Additionally, an individual may have a positive perception of a behavior and perceive reaffirmation by their reference group but have a lack of self-confidence in his or her own ability to cope with obstacles and challenges surrounding the activity, such as starting a new business, (Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). A note of explanation: *PBC is differentiable from self-efficacy in that self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs related to the capabilities of managing and controlling both internal and external events in their lives. Conversely, PBC refers to an individual's perception of control over a particular behavior such as starting a business (Awang, Amran, Md Nor, Ibrahim, & Mohd Razali, 2016). However, there are strong overlapping similarities between the two terms (Ajzen, 2002: 667), and the term "entrepreneurial" self-efficacy (ESE) enables the two terms to be used interchangeably.*

Self-perceptions act on an individual's planned behavior (cf. Baron, Tang, & Hmieleski, 2011; Leutner, Ahmetoglu, Akhtar, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) and they provide, at least, a

partial explanation of why some individuals choose self-employment as a career option (cf. Ajzen, 2002; Caliendo, Fossen, & Kritikos, 2014; Sipe, Larson, McKay, & Moss, 2016). Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has strong psychometric properties and is unquestionably a valuable research tool for scholars. However, although TPB is considered a valid framework for studying the relationship between behavior perceptions and entrepreneurship (cf. Rauch & Hulsink, 2015), primarily it plays an auxiliary role in shaping understanding of behavior propensities (cf. Taatila & Down, 2012). Since the theoretical model has a single focus (perceptions) and does not include other behavior influencing factors, its' predictive properties, in an entrepreneurial context, are equivocal. We theorize expanding the theory with the addition of IBTs may strengthen its predictive potential.

Continuous rigorous investigations of the influences on both behavior perceptions and independent behavior traits is a compelling endeavor. Greater understanding of these two discrete constructs may assist educators and governing agencies interested in encouraging, promoting, and supporting entrepreneurial activities.

Rationale for the TPEB Model: An Extension of TPB

The proposed TPEB Model adds four independent behavior traits (IBTs) to the three behavior perceptions of TPB, for a seven-dimension model. These include: Innovativeness; Proactiveness; Risk-tolerance (Bolton & Lane, 2012); and Work Ethic (Miller, Woehr, & Hudspeth, 2002). We believe these dimensions are particularly pertinent to investigations of entrepreneurial propensity since in their absence the inclination to embrace entrepreneurship as a viable career is likely hampered.

Innovativeness

Propensity to innovate is associated with the predisposition to champion or support new ideas (Ferreira, Marques, Bento, Ferreira, & Jalali, 2015); it is considered a creative process (Shane, Locke, & Collins, 2003) by which entrepreneurs are distinguishable from non-entrepreneurs in that they tend to be more adaptive and innovative in their creative styles (Buttner & Gyskiewicz, 1993). Innovativeness is an important characteristic of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial organizations because it strengthens both the work-environment and individual job-satisfaction (Lee, Wong, Foo, & Leung, 2011). Entrepreneurial propensity can be interpreted from an emancipatory perspective whereas the individual wishes to break free to express his or her own innovativeness; it represents a strong sense of individualism (cf. Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009). Therefore, the tendency to be innovative is considered a crucial antecedent of entrepreneurial planned behavior.

Proactiveness

Proactiveness is a tendency to identify opportunities and act on impulses (Crant, 2000) and proactive individuals are more likely to initiate and energize environmental change (Li, Liang, & Crant, 2010). Personal initiative is crucial to the entrepreneurial process and is characterized by an individual who is a self-starter, action-oriented, and persistent in his or her pursuits (cf. Frese & Gielnik, 2014). Proactive individuals are more likely to recognize opportunities and less likely to let them escape (Frese & Gielnik, 2014). Proactivity has been linked to leadership, personal achievements, and entrepreneurship (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999) and it represents the propensity to challenge the status quo. In entrepreneurs, it suggests an individual who is more likely to start a new business rather than buying or inheriting one (Trifiletti, Capozza, Pasin, & Falvo, 2009). In the development of their Individual

Entrepreneurial Orientation (IEO) measurement instrument, Bolton and Lane (2012) confirmed proactiveness as a valid factor in measuring entrepreneurial propensity. Therefore, the tendency to be proactive is considered a crucial antecedent of entrepreneurial planned behavior.

Risk-Tolerance

General risk propensity is a personal trait that influences decision-making processes and can be conceptualized as an individual's orientation toward "change" when making decisions (Hung, Tangpong, Li, & Li, 2012). When individuals tend to be risk-tolerant, they are likely to be more optimistic about the pursuit of untested opportunities (Hung, *et al.*, 2012). For example, Entrepreneurs are generally believed to be more willing to risk change since they often gamble their careers, personal finances, personal relationships, and professional reputations (cf. Carland, Hoy, & Carland, 1988; Stewart, Watson, Carland, & Carland, 1998; Stewart & Roth, 2001; Van Ness & Seifert, 2016). Risk-tolerance is considered a distinct dimension of entrepreneurial orientation and it is positively associated with proactiveness and innovation (Naldi, Nordqvist, Sjöberg, & Wiklund, 2007). The risk-tolerance of entrepreneurs, particularly growth-oriented individuals, is distinguishable from non-entrepreneur managers who have been found to be more risk averse (Stewart, *et al.*, 2001). Tolerance to risk has been found to be a significant predictor of self-employment intentions (Douglas & Shepherd, 2000; Segal, Borgia, & Schoenfeld, 2005) and the more risk-tolerant individuals are, the greater the likelihood of "self-selecting" entrepreneurial engagement (Stewart, *et al.*, 2001). Although all risk takers are not necessarily destined to become entrepreneurs, the literature suggests that individuals who are generally risk averse are less likely to become entrepreneurs (cf. Miner & Raju, 2004). Therefore, the tendency to be risk-tolerant is considered a crucial antecedent of entrepreneurial planned behavior.

Work Ethic

Work centrality and the tendency to forgo immediate rewards in the pursuit of future benefits is a central premise of overall work ethic (cf. Miller, *et al.*, 2002). This is a behavior tendency that is widely associated with entrepreneurial mindsets, since these individuals frequently demonstrate the willingness to work long hours, sometimes for weeks or even years to sustain their businesses (Van Ness & Seifert, 2016). Even their personal identity is often linked to their business venture, therefore, they are likely to demonstrate intense commitment to their enterprise (cf. Hirschfeld & Field, 2000; Mohrman & Cohen, 1995). Entrepreneurs commonly reveal the capacity to relinquish short-term rewards in order to achieve some future objective (Joy & Witt, 1992). It is not unusual for individuals with a strong work ethic to consider it the morally appropriate way of achieving objectives (Meriac, Woehr, Gorman, & Thomas, 2013; Van Ness, Melinsky, Buff, & Seifert, 2010). Hard work in this context, is the belief that one can achieve his or her objectives through an intense focus on and commitment to work responsibilities (Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010). The individual committed to work believes almost any obstacle can be overcome as a result of fortitude and perseverance (Dweck, 2010; Miller, *et al.*, 2002) and individuals with high tolerance for intense work demands are more likely to become self-employed (Douglas & Shepherd, 2000; Henderson & Robertson, 2000). This premise may have been reaffirmed by a Tipu and Ryan (2016) study in which they linked entrepreneurial intentions with dimensions of work ethic. Although individuals who possess a robust work ethic can be identified in all professions, this behavior trait is considered a crucially important antecedent of entrepreneurial planned behavior (Van Ness, Seifert, Marler, Wales, & Hughes, 2020).

Summarizing the Proposed Theory of Planned Entrepreneurial Behavior

The Theory of Planned Entrepreneurial Behavior (TPEB), proposed as a seven-dimension model, includes three primary behavior perceptions and four independent behavior traits. They are: (1) perceptions of entrepreneurial behaviors as alluring (*attractiveness*); (2) perceptions of social support for entrepreneurial engagement (*peer approval*); (3) perception of having the knowledge, skills, and ability to succeed as an entrepreneur (*entrepreneurial self-efficacy*); (4) tendency to be adaptive and creative (innovativeness); (5) tendency to act on impulses to seize opportunities (proactiveness); (6) tendency to embrace change and less inclined to retreat when faced with challenges (risk-tolerance); and (7) tendency to delay gratification and exert significant personal effort to achieve long term objectives (work ethic).

We do not suggest that individuals who possess positive indicators in each of the seven dimensions will necessarily demonstrate entrepreneurial propensity (EP) since exogenous factors such as opportunities and resource availability are also considerations. However, these characteristics are strongly associated with entrepreneurs and without positive perceptions and sustaining behavior traits (IBTs), entrepreneurial engagement is implausible (cf. Van Gelderen, Kautonen, & Fink, 2015). Therefore, we propose the seven dimension TPEB Model will have strong predictive properties.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The TPEB model may prove a useful tool for future research of the entrepreneurship phenomenon. At a minimum, exploring the synergistic effect of all seven endogenous variables on entrepreneurial propensity is a contribution in itself. This can be expanded to further understanding of trait versus state characteristics. In this case, we suggest that behavior tendencies are trait characteristics of the individual; one's level of risk tolerance, one's level of

work ethic, one's level of proactiveness, and one's level of innovativeness. We also recognize that certain situations, exogenous conditions, may impact the state manifestation of a behavioral trait. Thus, an individual may have a baseline level for risk tolerance that informs most actions, however, when faced with a particular situation, the manifestation of that behavioral trait might be different from what is normally displayed. Nevertheless, it is theorized that the baseline behavior trait is a significant influencing factor contributing to the initial propensity to pursue a given behavior. Since behavior perceptions and behavior traits appear to work in concert to impact entrepreneurial propensity, it begs the question of what exogenous variables act to influence these attributes. For example, can education influence perceptions and alter behavior traits?

A longitudinal study that involves administering questionnaires based on our seven-dimension model, to incoming students and again to these students prior to graduation, may enable the determination of whether, and if so how, and to what extent career-behavior perceptions and behavior traits might be altered by external influences such as formal education. Additionally, responses could be matched to career intentions of incoming students and to the same population immediately prior to graduation as a window into whether any relevant behavior perception and behavior trait changes can be associated with actual career choices.

There are several validated measurement instruments that could prove beneficial to future researchers in this domain of investigation. These include: (1) *measuring work ethic*: The "Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile - Short Form" (MWEP-SF) (Meriac, Woehr, Gorman & Thomas, 2013); (2) *measuring innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk tolerance*: The "Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation" (IEO) assessment (Bolton & Lane, 2012); (3) *measuring career intentions*: The "Entrepreneurial Attitudes and Intentions of University

Students" assessment (Liñán & Chen, 2009); (4) *measuring entrepreneurial self-efficacy*: The "Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy" (ESE) assessment (Chen, Greene, & Crick, 1998); and (5) *measuring perceived career attractiveness, peer approval, and behavioral control*: The Theory of Planned Behavior assessment (Ajzen, 2013).

In summary, since perceptions guide decisions and actions, and shapes beliefs (Tacca, 2011), when combined with a sustaining set of behavior traits (Liñán & Chen, 2009), they offer the potential of behavior predictability. Although positive perceptions and entrepreneur-associated behavior traits alone do not cause an individual to become entrepreneurially active, since resources and opportunities must also be available (Mishra & Zachary, 2015), without positive perceptions and the sustaining IBTs, entrepreneurial propensity is unlikely (cf. Van Ness, *et. al*, 2020). New knowledge leading to a stronger model for predicting entrepreneurial propensity would represent a significant contribution to the field of research (cf. Jornet-Gibert, Gallardo-Pujol, Suso, & Andres-Pueyo, 2012; Leeson & Heaven, 1999) and it offers an opportunity to assist educators and governing agencies interested in encouraging, promoting, and supporting entrepreneurial activities.

It is our sincere hope this work is useful to future researchers since understanding, encouraging, and supporting entrepreneurs has the potential of providing immeasurable benefits to a wide range of constituents, including but not limited to, entrepreneurs, job seekers, communities, and educators.

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