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Studying ‘the personal’ in entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship is often studied focusing on strategies, models and theories. However, studying entrepreneurship in this way gives a wrong impression of entrepreneurship as a profession in itself. Entrepreneurship mainly revolves around the entrepreneur himself and the internal human processes that occur during the start-up of the company and when running the business. Intuition, well-being, emotions, personal beliefs, values and motives are all concepts of great relevance in understanding this subject. This can be done by means of the autoethnography methodology; a still very underappreciated method in academical studies. This article examines the importance of autoethnography in the field of entrepreneurship.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship, ‘the personal’, Autoethnography, Study of Self, Emotions, Intuition, Rational, Internal Human Processes

Introduction

Entrepreneurship has become an interesting and popular career option in developing and developed countries (Gutterman, 2018). As a small entrepreneur myself, I see this happening constantly. Many people with an exciting hobby or passion convert this hobby or passion into

a business. I am such an example myself: I have converted my passion for photography, authentic online marketing and social media into a business. When following the arrangements, becoming an entrepreneur is easier and more interesting than ever before (Gutterman, 2018). Governments support the creation of new businesses with procurement programs, since entrepreneurs support the economy (Gutterman, 2018). Entrepreneurship is considered as a field of practice, in which entrepreneurs are guided by their habits designed by their cognitive maps or personal theories created by experiences, emotions or feelings (Johannisson, 2009). An intangible, personal and interesting field of practice (Gielnik et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship involves “the process of discovery, exploitation of new opportunities and evaluation; and that group of individuals who put these phases in practice (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, p. 218). Entrepreneurship is therefore fundamentally personal (Gielnik et al., 2020: 1). Gielnik et al. (2020) further distinguish the field of entrepreneurship by connecting it to the discipline of psychology, which deals with human behavior and the human mind (p.1). It provides a profound scientific basis to theorize and understand the field of entrepreneurship (Gielnik et al., 2020: 1).

Over 20 years ago, scholars and theorists had trouble with understanding the added value of studying entrepreneurship since this field of research lacked in having a conceptual framework (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, with the rise of new academic literature, methodologies and insights, studying entrepreneurship has become possible (Smith, 2015). An interesting way to study entrepreneurship is through the methodology autoethnography (Smith, 2015; Brouwers, 2017; Brouwers & Witschge; n.d.; Fletcher, 2011). Autoethnography is originally a methodology specifically used in psychology and social studies (Chang & Boyd, 2011). Unfortunately, less studies towards entrepreneurship used autoethnography as methodology (Gutterman, 2018). Partly, due to its constantly questioned academical relevance and, generalizability and validity (Fletcher, 2011). This theoretical framework focuses on the statement: “Autoethnography is relevant to gain a deeper understanding concerning the field of entrepreneurship”. It is relevant to get a clear understanding about how autoethnography could be used to understand entrepreneurship, since it may give completely new insights into its way of functioning on human level. In entrepreneurship, there is often a personal drive needed with connection to emotions, personal beliefs and intuition (Gielnik et al., 2020). It is intangible, something that cannot be understood by using interviews, surveys or observation (De Choudhury, 2014). A long-term self-observation is needed to completely understand what processes occurred on the inside of the human body when starting the venture and while running the venture. There is so much more to discover than solely strategies, logic rational thinking or new ideas that are consciously created by a human’s mind. This article reflects, adjusts and

combines previous written literature to give new insights into studying ‘the personal’ in entrepreneurship with autoethnography as methodology. The hypothesis for this article is that entrepreneurship becomes much more interesting when using autoethnography to get a clear, in-depth understanding about the ongoing processes in a human’s body instead of solely focusing on the human mind.

‘The personal’ in entrepreneurship as a field of research

The concept entrepreneurship is nowadays way more occurring in academical studies than it was over 20 years ago (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). According to Shane and Venkataraman (2000) this was due to the lack of theoretical frameworks. Scholars did not see potential in studying the field of entrepreneurship (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Due to the rapid increase in the emergence of small businesses in the last few years, all kind of issues emerged that requested for further academical research (Richtermeyer, 2003). Therefore, studying and understanding entrepreneurship became more relevant and also more interesting (Richtermeyer, 2003; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). To date, current studies have mostly focused on hard theories, strategies, rational thinking and models (Gielnik et al., 2020). On the other hand, researchers omit a very important part, namely the internal process of the entrepreneur itself, such as emotions, feelings, intuition and personal convictions (Gielnik et al., 2020). Before we dive further into this problem, 'entrepreneurship' will have to be defined first.

There are multiple definitions among the concept of entrepreneurship. From an economical perspective, entrepreneurship can be conceptualized as “the creation of a new business and the bearing of the risk associated with that business in exchange for profits to be derived from the exploitation of opportunities in the marketplace” (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000: 1). Think about all the demands from customers that are not currently fulfilled (Burger-Helmchen, 2013). Viewing my own business, there are many personal branding photographers and many women who offer services related to social media and online marketing. With this in mind, how can I, as an upcoming entrepreneur, distinguish myself? Where does the customer still have a desire that has not yet been fulfilled in this saturated market? Also, what is important to me, what is my intuition telling me and what would make me truly happy? For me I found the answer in the concepts ‘well-being’ and ‘authenticity’. Two concepts that can be directly linked to my interest in autoethnographic research and entrepreneurship itself, but more on that later. I distinguish myself as an entrepreneur by believing in real authentic online marketing and social media. That means, having a strategy in the back of your mind, but following your

heart and intuition when deciding on what to communicate online or what to share. This is just one example, but thinking about the fact that an entrepreneurship can be created out of anything, you can imagine that an entrepreneurship can take a variety of forms (Gutterman, 2018).

Besides an economical perspective, 'entrepreneurship' as a general perspective can be defined as the organizing of new organizations (Gartner, 1985; Hornsby et al., 1993). Weick (1979) adds to this definition that organizing and/or creating organizations is to build ongoing independent actions into wise sequences that generate the desired outcomes (p.3). These independent actions are mainly created by 'creative destruction'; a concept created by Schumpeter (Schumpeter, 1950; Gutterman, 2018). According to Schumpeter, the entrepreneur is mainly driven by innovation which can change an existing product or service into a complete new one, or they create completely new innovative products and/or services (Gutterman, 2018). Both ways, directly 'destruct' processes and products that have been used in the past (Schumpeter, 1950; Gutterman, 2018). Innovation occurs from creative processes, that generate through mental and internal processes and lead to the creation of new, original ideas (Unsworth, 2001; Dartnall, 2002: 153). These creative processes happen inside a human body and deal with much more than solely rational thinking (Dartnall, 2002: 153; La Pira, 2010). Until now, the processes of becoming an entrepreneur and understanding entrepreneurship in general has mainly been studied focusing on corporate entrepreneurship and businesses including models, theories and strategies (Hornsby et al., 1993; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Gutterman, 2018). However, these definitions lack on the most important component in an entrepreneurship; the entrepreneur himself (Gielnik et al., 2020). Empirical evidence produced by economic scholars and entrepreneurs indicates that entrepreneurship cannot be correctly understood as a simply profit-seeking activity (Shir, 2015). It should be more focused on what drives people in entrepreneurship and what makes them persist of continuous entrepreneurship (Shir, 2015). Therefore, Gorgievski and Stephan (2016) add to the previous mentioned definitions that entrepreneurship is "an occupational choice of individuals to work for themselves on their own account and risk". This defines self-employment and is often used in research on entrepreneurship and well-being (Gorgievski & Stephan, 2016). Johannisson (2009) calls entrepreneurship both art as science. According to him, entrepreneurship can be considered as field of practice, in which entrepreneurs are guided by their habits, feelings and intuition (Johannisson, 2009). Gielnik et al. (2020) offer special attention to the psychological part of entrepreneurship and focus on the processes happening on the inside of the human mind and body, which assists in gaining a deeper understanding in the effect of well-being on the inside human processes. It provides us a profound scientific basis to understand and theorize the field

of entrepreneurship on psychological basis instead of solely using corporate models, theories and strategies (Gielnik et al., 2020: 1). It also offers the opportunity to further examine passion, vocation, emotions, feelings and intuition to understand how these concepts contribute to the subject of entrepreneurship (Johannisson, 2009; Gielnik et al., 2021; Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.; Brouwers, 2017). Topics that influence a persons' sense of well-being and intuition (Symon et al., 2012: 4; La Pira, 2010). Well-being, which is defined by the World Health Organization as “state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, 2014), is an extremely relevant concept to pay special attention to when studying ‘the personal’ in entrepreneurship (Shir, 2015). Mainly, because on a good state of mental health and well-being entrepreneurial processes are created (Shir, 2015). Being an entrepreneur is categorized as one of the most stressful jobs existing, due to long working hours and an average earning that is often lower than working as a normal employee (Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.; Stephan, 2018: 290). Despite, entrepreneurs indicate as a constant recurring theme that they are extremely happy with what they do (Stephan, 2018: 290). This is because they have managed to turn their passion into their work. Mental health and well-being are traditionally studied in psychology and public health, but have recently become more important to the field of entrepreneurship as well (Stephan, 2018: 290; Shir, 2015). As Stephan (2018) further explains, mental health and well-being is essential to effective human functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The same goes for entrepreneurs; happy and satisfied entrepreneurs tend to perform better, have a more intense connection with their intuition and have more successful creative processes (Stephan, 2018; Martin & Wilson, 2017). Research on the mental health and well-being of entrepreneurs is critical to understanding entrepreneurial motivation, decision making and action (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2015). Stephan (2018) adds here that it ultimately helps to sustain the societal and economic benefits of entrepreneurship (p.291).

Another relevant concept in studying entrepreneurship that is connected to a high sense of well-being is intuition (La Pira, 2010). Oprah states: “My business skills have come from being guided by my intuition” and also Bill Gates states: “As an entrepreneur you cannot ignore your intuition” (La Pira, 2010). I recognize their statements in my experiences as an entrepreneur; my intuition is my guidance throughout everything I engage in. Not only as an entrepreneur, but also in my academic writing and my personal life. Everything is based or guided through my feeling and intuition. Entrepreneurs resorting to their intuitions conclude that most decisions related to determining marketability about some product or service,

investments or sell-offs, for example, are all based on hunches or gut feeling (La Pira, 2010). According to Allinson et al. (2000) the nature and style of the successful entrepreneur will be more intuitive. Entrepreneurs are located in a rapidly changing environment and are therefore, allocated to quick decision making, too rapid to allow for an orderly sequential rational analysis of the situation (Allinson et al., 2000; Simon, 1987; Johannisson, 2009). Intuition can be defined as ‘to contemplate or look within’ (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Intuition is, similar to well-being, extremely intangible. It is something that can only be felt and is experienced differently per person (Hutson, 2019). The most common explanation is “the ability of an individual to access stored experiences and/or knowledge in their subconscious mind” (La Pira, 2010). McCraty et al. (2004) adds that intuition is sensing that occurs outside conscious awareness and can be regarded to as paranormal phenomenon or as cognitive based extension of decision making (La Pira, 2010). It is the passionate attentional focus of the entrepreneur that creates a connectedness, that provides the feeling component of the intuition, which eventually serves as the steering force behind an entrepreneurship (La Pira, 2010).

Real life examples demonstrate that it is extremely relevant to achieve further in-depth understanding on the importance of entrepreneurial well-being and intuition. Some innovative ideas may strategically be very interesting, since it may generate lots of revenue, but if it does not give that right positive energy that normally comes from real passion, it may influence that persons’ sense of well-being (Migdal & MacDonald, 2013; Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.). A real-life example here is from a friend of mine who decided to start an entrepreneurship in solar panels since the demand to these eco-friendly products was rapidly growing in the Netherlands and there were still few suppliers on the market. In no-time, the business became a big success and also revenue was in abundance. However, he created this business without it being something he had a passion for. Therefore, he indeed created a lot of revenue, but he became depressed and burned-out in a very short period of time. Despite the fact that he gained a lot of money, he, on the other hand, only lost energy instead of gaining new. He was an individual and his company. Those two parts were completely out of balance. This is also one of the dangerous parts of being an entrepreneur; it never ends (Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.). The article of Brouwers and Witschge (n.d.) is a perfect supplement to this story. They conducted an autoethnographical study towards working hours in journalism and showed within their study that it really should be your vocation and passion, because if it is not something you are willing to go for, your sense of well-being will be influenced in no-time (Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.). This is an example for entrepreneurs in the field of journalism, but this is the same for many others. It never stops. In conclusion, a good idea with a lot of

money in prospect could therefore be a motivation to start a business (Gutterman, 2018), but if this is not in line with your passion, there is a chance that you as an entrepreneur will not last long (Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.; Migdal & MacDonald, 2013). Therefore, it is so important to not solely focus on models, theories and strategies, since we may miss the most important part: ‘the personal’ in entrepreneurship (Gielnik et al., 2021, Stephan, 2018). An important reason for the lack of understanding and results towards the motives, internal and mental processes of driving into entrepreneurship may be the narrow focus on the measuring of individuals’, values and motivations (Shir, 2015). In case scholars try to conduct a study towards individual entrepreneurs, it involves some methodological problems (Shir, 2015; Chang & Boyd, 2011). Social desirability bias in particular, followed by extreme sensitivity to fluctuating circumstances, and wishful thinking and cognitive dissonance (Shir, 2015). This is where autoethnography as suitable methodology comes in (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography as methodology for studying ‘the personal’

A higher focus on inside processes, understanding the most vulnerable and intangible parts of a human body, studying the self as object and all in connection to the cultural and social; I am referring to the autoethnographic methodology (Ellis, 2004; McIlveen, 2008). It is originally used in anthropology, sociology and education with an autobiographical genre of research that demonstrates multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis, 2004; McIlveen, 2008). Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that enables scholars to achieve contextual and autobiographical data to gain an understanding of societal context and a sociocultural meaning of the self (Chang & Boyd, 2011: 13; Wall, 2006). It is therefore a self-focused and context-conscious method (Wambura Ngunjiri et al., 2010) that offers the possibility to be vulnerable through self-reflection and look inward for a deeper understanding (Ellis, 2004: 37). According to Chang (2007) autoethnography has multiple benefits. Firstly, it is a research friendly method for both researcher and readers (Chang, 2007). This methodology not only enables researchers to easily access primary source data, but it also reaches readers with openness and vulnerability (Wambura Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Chang, 2007). It tends to appeal to readers more, mainly because it is written in personal engaging writing style instead of a more academical form of writing (Chang, 2007). Secondly, this method is an excellent vehicle through which researchers enhances cultural understanding of self and others (Chang, 2007: 214). Especially, this second benefit is interesting in understanding why autoethnography is such a relevant methodology in studying ‘the personal’ in entrepreneurship. This is mainly because it deals with self-reflection,

self-examination and self-understanding (Chang, 2007; 2014; Ellis, 2004; Uotinen, 2013; Wall, 2006). It gives us the opportunity to go deeper and analyze why certain choices were made, how it felt and what the motivations were (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2007). It provides a lot of in-depth information about the feelings, motives, intuitive involvement, considerations, beliefs and thoughts of an entrepreneur (Fletcher, 2011). It gives us the opportunity to understand how and why certain decisions are made: is it indeed mainly through rational analysis as is constantly claimed (Hornsby et al., 1993; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Gutterman, 2018) or are most decisions made on the basis of feeling, presentiment, inspiration and intuition? Entrepreneurship also, asks for are certain amount of vulnerability to be able to reach the right customers for their brand (Shir, 2015). If you are completely in line with yourself and know exactly which target group suits you, then you are also able to sense what this target group needs. The majority of customers buy on the basis of feeling (Chierotti, 2021). So, if you know how to communicate your feelings to your target group in the right way, this will result in a response (Chierotti, 2021). This can be directly linked to autoethnography which asks us to be vulnerable during the observations (Ellis, 2004: 137). Using autoethnography as methodology has another benefit which is not only interesting for readers, but also the researcher who conducts, shares and reads the autoethnography (Chang, 2007). It is connected to context-consciousness of the methodology, which intends to connect, self with social, self with others and self with culture and context (Wambura Ngunjiri et al., 2010). This context-consciousness of the methodology often becomes (self-)transformative. Some may become more self-reflective on a daily basis, evolve a desire to learn about 'others of difference', development of an inclusive community and others even experience healings from the emotional scars of the past (Chang, 2007). It offers increased awareness of self and others and may lead to relevant new insights and even transformation for academics, economics and (future) entrepreneurs (Chang, 2007). Fletcher (2011) adds here that the inclusivity of context is especially relevant in entrepreneurship research (p.67), mainly due to the evidence of entrepreneurial activity and the discussion related to the social situatedness of entrepreneurial activity. Gaining clear understanding of the context in entrepreneurship research, it may produce practical knowledge for other entrepreneurs, scholars or general people to use in everyday life to enhance their well-being (Fletcher, 2011).

Similar to entrepreneurship, autoethnography deals with well-being and emotions as well (Brouwers & Witschge, n.d.; Chang & Boyd, 2011; Fletcher, 2011). Ellis (1991) further clarifies that autoethnography could be the perfect way of studying entrepreneurship, since the most intuitive people with less rigid scientific approaches to human experience encompass the

best area to study emotions (p.44). Autoethnography draws upon ethnographic fieldwork but is written and presented in a form of a self-narrative (Fletcher, 2011). It therefore, invites to researcher to be vulnerable (Ellis, 2004). Johannisson (2009) adds here that entrepreneurship cannot be properly understood until researchers and readers live and feel it for themselves. This means, gaining insight by way of personal relating; opening up on emotions, feelings, gut feelings, intuitive guidance, beliefs and thoughts (Fletcher, 2011). Fletcher (2011) further clarifies the sense of responsibility and emotional engagement is even stronger in entrepreneurship, since the venture is part of the entrepreneurs' life. Through autoethnography it is possible to examine how entrepreneurs access certain contextual spaces, through their intuition, emotions, feelings and thoughts and how well-being is part of these processes (Fletcher, 2011; Blommaert, 2001). That makes the method even more relevant for understanding the field.

Autoethnography is often questioned in academical literature on its external validity and its generalizability, since the data is most of the time solely based on just one object or person (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2007; Brouwers, 2017). The external validity and generalizability in autoethnography are described vastly different than in other social sciences (Brouwers, 2017). However, in this methodology the specifics and situated knowledge become important. It matters in what combination and in what exact situation a person is becoming connected with others and culture. Since the specifics become important, generalizability becomes less important (Brouwers, 2017). According to Brouwers (2017) researchers do not have to count for all it describes, but it rather has to resonate with its readers. If they perceive it as believe data and information, it is valid in the autoethnographic sense. Thus, external validity in autoethnography tests value, not like-mindedness (Brouwers, 2017). The insights gained through an autoethnographic study are intended to enlighten researchers through reflection and make them, ideally, profit through publication (Eschler, 2016). A methodology relevant for future studies related to the field of entrepreneurship (Fletcher, 2011).

Conclusion

Both entrepreneurship and autoethnography deal with sensitivity, like emotions, intuition, gut feeling, thoughts and personal beliefs. In contrast with previous studies mainly focusing on (corporate) entrepreneurship, understanding this field is not only about statistics, theories, models and strategies, but is largely related to the person behind the company: the entrepreneur himself. Entrepreneurship asks for a deeper connection with self to be able to come along in the

hard oversaturated market. It involves making decisions on the basis of intuition, personal beliefs and motivations, while guarding their senses of well-being in the meantime. The methodology autoethnography offers the possibility to study those vulnerable and sensitive parts of entrepreneurship. Through autoethnography it is possible to examine how entrepreneurs construct or access certain contextual spaces (Fletcher, 2011; Blommaert, 2001). The only way to genuinely understand what inside processes are involved in a becoming (successful) entrepreneur, is by putting the readers and other scholars in their shoes through an autoethnographical study. Notwithstanding the criticisms regarding the generalizability and external validity of autoethnography, gives this methodology the opportunity through very personal experiences and reflections to gain new insights and benefit from them during new academical studies on entrepreneurship. A highly unknown research area with a lot of potential!

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