

Impact of childhood experiences on the development of entrepreneurial intentions

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Abstract: *Fostering entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial culture has become a key policy priority for governments. To encourage entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial culture, however, there is a need to understand the factors that influence and shape individuals' intentions to start a business. This study extends models of entrepreneurial intentions by investigating the influence of various childhood-experience factors on the perceived feasibility and desirability of starting a business. A structured questionnaire was completed by over 1,000 university students and analysed using regression analysis. Results indicated that perceptions of entrepreneurship were influenced not only by parental ownership of a business, but also by a difficult childhood and frequent relocation.*

Keywords: *entrepreneurial intentions; childhood experiences; perceived feasibility; perceived desirability*

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In the last two decades there has been growing awareness of the importance of entrepreneurship and new venture creation. At a national level, entrepreneurial activity contributes to prosperity, economic growth and renewal (Hindle and Rushworth, 2000). In regional areas, entrepreneurship is encouraged to overcome regional disparities in wealth and to solve local employment problems (Nolan, 2003). It is also viewed as a solution for problems of impoverished communities and ethnic groups (Logan, Alba and Stulus, 2003). Indeed, fostering entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial culture has become a key policy priority for governments (Luthje and Franke, 2003).

It is recognized that to start and manage a new venture successfully requires both human and environmental resources (Baum, Locke and Smith, 2001). Venture capitalists have traditionally placed more

emphasis on the personal characteristics of entrepreneurs than on other factors in assessing new ventures (Shepherd, 1999). Moreover, recent research has confirmed that, in the business start-up process, human resources are more important than environmental factors (Rotefoss and Kolvereid, 2005). Indeed, it is recommended that government policies and programmes should be directed towards increasing awareness of entrepreneurial career possibilities, as well as providing the opportunity to gain entrepreneurial experience (Rotefoss and Kolvereid, 2005).

A number of programmes have been put in place in an attempt to change the attitudes of young people towards entrepreneurship and to encourage entrepreneurial activity. These include various entrepreneurship and enterprise education programmes and business-plan competitions. The people who engage in these

programmes are often those who already have an interest in starting their own businesses (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003) and this interest may have developed early in childhood. For example, it is well established that young people whose families own their own businesses are more likely to intend to start their own business (Krueger, 1993). An understanding of the factors that influence and shape individuals' intentions to start a business is important if governments are successfully to develop policies and programmes to encourage entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial culture.

To appreciate more fully the path to entrepreneurship – defined as business start-ups – this paper explores the determinants of entrepreneurial intentions, specifically focusing on the impact of childhood experiences on attitudes towards business start-ups.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Early research into the factors that influence individuals' entrepreneurial activities focused on personality traits such as the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961), locus of control, risk-taking propensity (Brockhaus, 1980) and tolerance of ambiguity (Schere, 1982). While providing some insight into the process of entrepreneurship, the trait approach was criticized because of poor methodological design, failure to agree on a definition of entrepreneurship, and inconsistent findings (Gartner, 1989). It was debated whether trait theory should be abandoned or whether better quality studies would produce more consistent findings (Carland, Hoy and Carland, 1988). At the same time, more comprehensive models of entrepreneurship focused attention on entrepreneurial behaviours and attitudes (Carland *et al*, 1988).

The development of intentions models (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) has offered researchers more comprehensive frameworks for explaining and predicting entrepreneurial behaviours. Intentions models of entrepreneurship are grounded in the field of social psychology (Ajzen, 1985; Triandis, 1980) in which intentions have been identified as the most 'immediate and important' antecedent of behaviour (Abraham and Sheeran, 2003) such as starting one's own business (Krueger, Reilly and Carsrud, 2000). Attitudes, in turn, have been shown to explain around 50% of variance in behaviour (Autio *et al*, 1997). Intentions thus serve as important mediating variables between the act of starting a business and potential exogenous variables.

Several conceptual models of entrepreneurial intentions have been developed to assist our understanding of the factors and influences that shape individuals' intentions to start a business (Autio *et al*, 1997; Bird,

1988; Davidsson, 1995; Shapero, 1985; Shapero and Sokol, 1982). There is little variation among the different approaches taken in these models, and also little difference in the amount of variance in intentions explained by the various models (Krueger *et al*, 2000). In this research, we have adopted the Shapero model (Shapero and Sokol, 1982; Shapero, 1985) as operationalized by Krueger (1993). In this model, intentions are a function of the perceived feasibility and the perceived desirability of starting a business, and exogenous variables influence intentions only through these mediating variables.

The use of intentions models is now well accepted in the literature, and researchers have turned their attention to developing richer, more comprehensive models to predict the intention to start a business. In particular, these models seek to identify factors that may indirectly affect entrepreneurial intentions by influencing key attitudes or perceptions, such as desirability and feasibility. These factors include: life situations, such as unemployment (Lawrence and Hamilton, 1997) and family commitments (Hisrich and Brush, 1984); personal-background variables, such as prior exposure to a family business (Autio *et al*, 1997; Davidsson, 1995; Krueger, 1993), a difficult childhood (Ohe and Ohe, 1996), and frequent relocation as a child (Davidsson, 1995; Reynolds, 1995). While a family business background has received considerable attention in the literature, the impact of other childhood-experience variables has received less attention, especially in conceptual models of entrepreneurial intentions. The focus in this paper is on childhood-experience factors that may influence entrepreneurial intentions.

Childhood experiences

The decision to start a business can be triggered by a particular situation, such as unemployment or family commitments (Bird, 1988; Greenberger and Sexton, 1988; Learned, 1992; Shapero and Sokol, 1982). The decision can also be the result of one's life course (Reynolds, 1995) and/or cumulative events over time (Learned, 1992), such as childhood experiences (Cox and Jennings, 1995; Ohe and Ohe, 1996) and later work experiences.

Family business background

One variable that has received considerable attention in the literature is prior exposure to a family business. Research has found that entrepreneurs often come from homes where the mother or father was self-employed (Crant, 1996; Dyer, 1992; Roberts and Wainer, 1968). The parental role models and/or exposure to self-employment are considered to influence entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviour (Dyer and Handler, 1994).

Exposure to entrepreneurship, such as a family business, has been incorporated into entrepreneurial-intentions models (Krueger, 1993; Shapero and Sokol, 1982) which posit that exposure to a family business indirectly influences entrepreneurial intentions through perceived desirability and feasibility. The impact of the family business may depend on both the quantity and quality of the exposure. Krueger's (1993) study of university business students found that the breadth of prior exposure to entrepreneurship (such as parents starting a business) was positively related to perceived feasibility, and the positiveness of prior exposure was positively related to perceived desirability. In a study of secondary-school students, Peterman and Kennedy (2003) reported that positiveness of experience was related to perceived desirability, but in contrast to the Krueger findings, breadth of experience was not related to perceived feasibility. Because of these inconsistent results, we test the following hypotheses:

- H1. Family business experience is related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.
- H2. Family business experience is related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.
- H3. Positiveness of family business experience is related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.
- H4. Positiveness of family business experience is related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business

Difficult childhood

Less attention has been paid to other childhood experiences that may shape entrepreneurial attitudes and

behaviours. The childhood experiences of entrepreneurs have been found to be difficult, characterized by poverty, insecurity and/or neglect (Collins and Moore, 1964) and personal tragedies, such as parents' divorce, a parent's death, family financial difficulties and/or serious illness (Cox and Jennings, 1995; Ohe and Ohe, 1996). Clinical studies of entrepreneurs suggest they are often affected by poverty, poor relationships with their fathers, strong controlling mothers, and feelings of rejection and remoteness, which result in hostility, guilt, anger and suspicion of people in positions of authority (Kets de Vries, 1976, 1977, 1996). Difficult childhoods are also posited to increase one's self-reliance, which in turn increases one's ability to cope with the risks and uncertainties of self-employment (Scherer *et al*, 1989). A study comparing managers and entrepreneurs has confirmed that managers and entrepreneurs do indeed tend to differ in their family background. Entrepreneurs have a much poorer relationship with their fathers than managers, greater identification with their work, more willingness to take risks, and a higher level of initiative and independence (Malach-Pines *et al*, 2002).

The difficult-childhood variable has not previously been incorporated in intentions models. Our hypotheses, therefore, are:

- H5. Difficult childhood experiences are positively related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.
- H6. Difficult childhood experiences are positively related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.

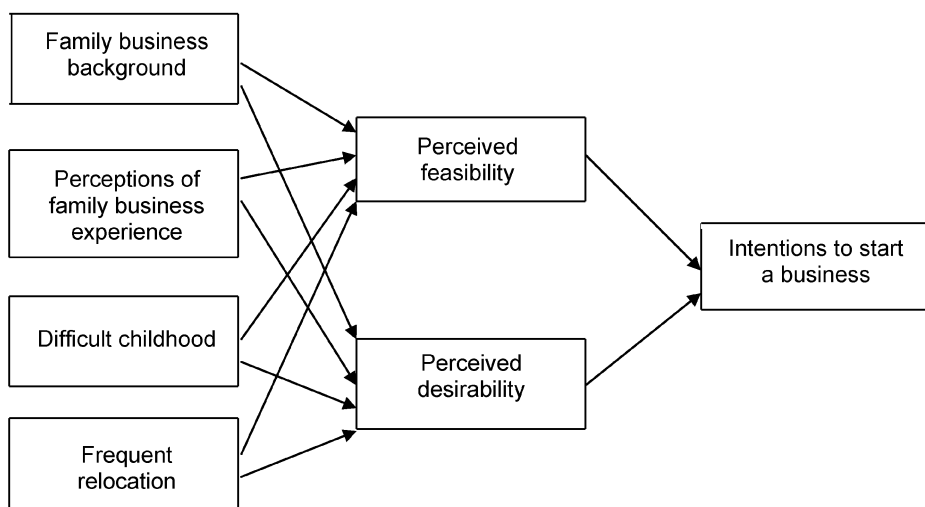


Figure 1(a). Entrepreneurial-intentions model.

Frequent relocation

An individual’s self-reliance and adaptability to new situations are related to entrepreneurship, and such resilience and adaptability are associated with radical change during one’s life. Moving location frequently is seen as one aspect of radical change (Davidsson, 1995). Reynolds (1995) found nascent entrepreneurs were less likely to have lived their whole lives in the same geographical area and more likely to have lived in several places during their lives. Davidsson (1995) related frequent moves to general attitudes related to change, achievement, money (negative) and autonomy, as well as domain attitudes of societal contribution and know-how. These findings suggest that frequent relocation should influence both perceived desirability and perceived feasibility.

H7. Frequent relocation is positively related to perceived desirability of starting one’s own business.

H8. Frequent relocation is positively related to perceived feasibility of starting one’s own business.

Figure 1(a) presents the entrepreneurial-intentions model incorporating the additional childhood-experiences factors discussed above.

Research design and methodology

In this study, we focus on undergraduate students enrolled in introductory courses in their first year of university studies in Australia. University students are well positioned for our purpose – close to their childhood experiences, yet looking towards future employment and careers. In the transition to university study, they have considered their future career prospects in some depth. Moreover, university students are typically in their late teens, a time in life that is considered very important in shaping their attitudes, and therefore they constitute an ideal group in which to study attitudes towards entrepreneurship. The sample is therefore representative of citizens who undertake tertiary education and typically start the knowledge-intensive businesses that are so important in developed economies.

Students attending major first-year classes from six out of seven faculties at the university in the first and second semesters of 2002 completed the questionnaires. With the approval and cooperation of lecturers, researchers distributed the questionnaire during class sessions. Most students completed and returned them during the sessions. Participation was voluntary and 1,075 students completed and submitted the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of just over 60%. Table 1 presents the distribution of students across faculty disciplines.

Table 1. Respondents.

Discipline	Female	Male	Total
Arts	83	23	106
Business, economics and law	190	166	356
Social science	60	21	81
Engineering	18	70	88
Science	167	80	247
Health science	93	27	120
IT	12	24	36
Total	623	411	1,034

The survey consisted of a six-page, structured questionnaire. Questions on entrepreneurial intentions, perceived feasibility of starting a business and perceived desirability of starting a business were based on previously published studies by Davidsson (1995) and Krueger (1993, 2000). The questions on childhood experience were developed to gain an understanding of whether respondents perceived that their early life had been difficult, both generally and in comparison with their peers. We measured frequent relocation by asking about the actual number of cities or towns in which respondents had lived, as intercity transfers (as opposed to local relocation) would disrupt social relationships and challenge the individual to adapt to a new environment. Exposure to family business was measured in terms of parents starting their own business and the positiveness of the experience.

Response options included five-point Likert scales and appropriate categorical and dichotomous scales. The items used in the questionnaire for this analysis are listed in Table 2 together with information about their source and the reliability of the measures.

Analysis and results

A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted between students’ intentions to start up their own business as the dependent variable, and perceived feasibility and perceived desirability as the independent variables. As reported in Table 3, the analysis revealed that perceived desirability and feasibility contributed significantly to predicting the intention to start up a business. In total, 51% of the variance was explained by perceived desirability and perceived feasibility. This analysis confirmed the usefulness of the model in explaining intentions in this group of university students.

Having established the applicability of the model for university students, the childhood-experience variables of a family business background, positiveness of family business experience, a difficult childhood and frequent relocation were included in regression analyses to test their impact on perceived desirability and feasibility.

Table 2. Questionnaire items.

Entrepreneurial intentions (Davidsson, 1995, Cronbach alpha = 0.80)
 Have you ever thought about starting your own business? (Never thought about it at all ... Seriously thought about it)
 Estimate the likelihood that you'll start your own business in the next 5 years (Very unlikely ... very likely)
 Estimate the likelihood that you'll start your own business in the next 10 years (Very unlikely ... very likely)

Perceived desirability (Krueger, 1993 and Krueger *et al*, 2000, Cronbach alpha = 0.69)
 How attractive is it for you to start your own business? (Very unattractive ... very attractive)
 If you started your own business, how would you feel about doing it? (I'd hate doing it ... I'd love doing it)
 If you started your own business, how tense would you be? (Very tense ... very relaxed)
 If you started your own business, how enthusiastic would you be? (Very unenthusiastic ... very enthusiastic)

Perceived feasibility (Krueger, 1993 and Krueger *et al*, 2000, Cronbach alpha = 0.67)
 How practical is it for you to start your own business? (Not very practical ... very practical)
 How hard do you think it would be to start your own business? (Very hard ... very easy)
 If you started your own business, what do you think your workload would be? (Very high ... low)
 If you start your own business, how certain of success are you? (Very certain of failing ... very certain of success)
 Do you know enough to start your own business? (Know absolutely nothing ... know everything)

Exposure to family business
 Did you parents ever start their own business? (Yes/no)
 If yes, how would you rate their experience of starting their own business? (Positive/negative/neutral)

Difficult childhood (Source: Original measure, Cronbach alpha = 0.73)
 I would describe my life experiences prior to entering university as easy. (Strongly disagree ... strongly agree)
 Compared to my peers, my life experiences have been challenging (eg loss of a parent, divorce, economic hardship. (Strongly disagree ... strongly agree)
 I've had to overcome a lot to get where I am today. (Strongly disagree ... strongly agree)

Frequent relocation
 In how many different cities/towns have you lived? (One/two–three/four–five/more than five)

Table 4 reports these results and shows in section (a) that a family business background, a positive family-background experience and a difficult childhood all significantly influence the desirability of starting a business, accounting for 6% of the variation in desirability. In contrast, frequent relocation was not found to be a significant factor. Section (b) reveals that all variables except a family business background were significantly associated with feasibility to start a business. It bears

emphasis that a positive family business experience was a significant influence on feasibility, explaining 4% of the variation in feasibility. The results of section (c) show that these variables influence intentions indirectly through perceived feasibility and perceived desirability, which have a direct influence on intentions, explaining 46% of the variation in intentions. These significant relationships are shown in Figure 1b and a summary table of the results of the hypotheses tested is provided in Table 5.

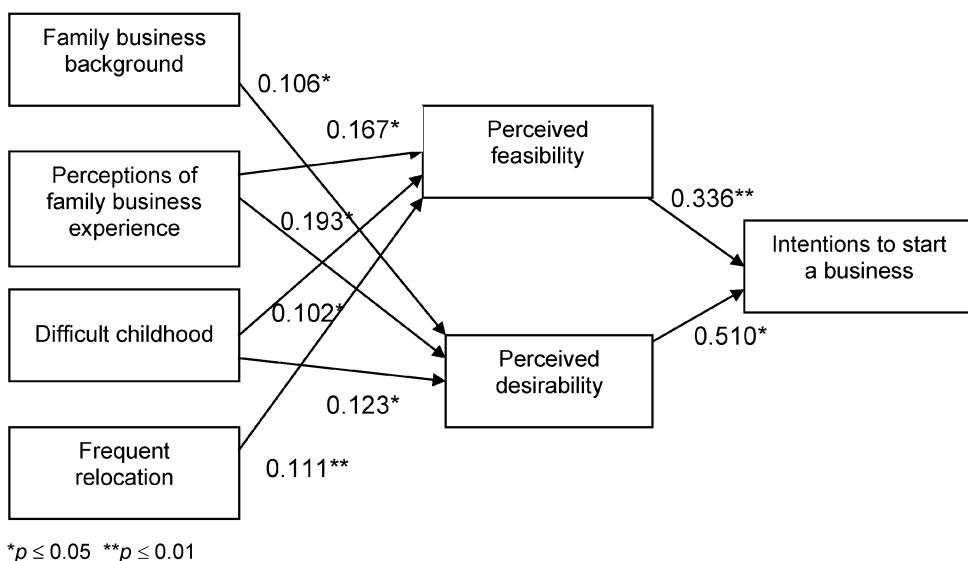


Figure 1(b). Model showing significant relationships between variables.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis of intentions model.

Effect of desirability and feasibility on intentions to start a business.

Adj R^2 = 0.5	F = 533.351	Sig 0.000	
Variable	β	t	
Desirability	0.473	19.185	0.000
Feasibility	0.360	14.581	0.000

Table 4. Results of regression analysis of childhood experiences on desirability and feasibility and intentions of starting a business.

(a) Effect of parental business, parent business experience, difficult childhood and frequent relocation on perceived desirability of starting a business.

Adj R^2 = 0.063	F = 10.589	Sig 0.000	
Variable	β	t	
Parent owned business	0.106	2.581	0.010
Parent business experience	0.193	5.094	0.000
Difficult childhood	0.123	2.971	0.003
Frequent relocation	-0.035	-0.843	0.400

(b) Effect of parental business, parent business experience, difficult childhood and frequent relocation on perceived feasibility of starting a business.

Adj R^2 = 0.040	F = 6.797	Sig 0.000	
Variable	β	t	
Parent owned business	-0.005	-0.320	0.905
Parent business experience	0.167	3.963	0.000
Difficult childhood	0.102	2.423	0.016
Frequent relocation	0.111	2.760	0.008

(c) Effect of parental business, parent business experience, difficult childhood, frequent relocation, perceived feasibility and perceived desirability on intentions to start a business.

Adj R^2 = 0.46	F = 23.538	Sig 0.000	
Variable	β	t	
Perceived desirability	0.510	15.467	0.000
Perceived feasibility	0.336	10.180	0.000
Parent owned business	-0.019	-0.642	0.521
Parent business experience	-0.002	-0.081	0.936
Difficult childhood	0.016	0.541	0.589
Frequent relocation	0.018	0.598	0.550

Discussion

Using the conceptual model of entrepreneurial intentions, the aim of this study was to examine the influence of childhood experiences (difficult childhood, frequent relocation, parents owning a business and family business experience) directly on the desirability and feasibility of starting a business. Previous research indicates that a family background in business results in

Table 5. Summary of results of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Result
H1. Family business experience is related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.	Supported
H2. Family business experience is related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.	Not supported
H3. Positiveness of family business experience is related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.	Supported
H4. Positiveness of family business experience is related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.	Supported
H5. Difficult childhood experiences are positively related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.	Supported
H6. Difficult childhood experiences are positively related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.	Supported
H7. Frequent relocation is positively related to perceived desirability of starting one's own business.	Not supported
H8. Frequent relocation is positively related to perceived feasibility of starting one's own business.	Supported

higher intentions to start a business, but the other variables have received little attention. The results of this study suggest that other childhood experiences also influence perceptions of entrepreneurship.

As part of the childhood experience, a family business background was a significant influence only in relation to the desirability of starting a business. We can conclude, therefore, that having parents who have owned a business may increase the attractiveness of self-employment, but not necessarily the feasibility. However, those who report a positive view of their family's business experience perceive starting a business as both desirable and feasible. These findings are somewhat at odds with previous research (Krueger, 1993), which found that breadth of experience in small business was related to the feasibility of starting a business, while the positiveness of such experience related only to desirability. Differences in these findings could be partially explained by sample size, as there were over 1,000 respondents in this study. In addition, the importance of parental influences may change with the age of the respondents, especially if they are late adolescents, as in the case of this study.

In line with research undertaken by Ohe and Ohe (1996), our results document the significance of a difficult childhood to perceptions of entrepreneurship. In particular, our findings show that those who perceive their childhoods to have been hard or challenging tend to find starting a business more desirable and more feasible than people who believe that their childhood was less challenging. The argument underlying this finding is that individuals who have faced adversity in

their developmental stages have become self-reliant and are likely to perceive the autonomy of self-employment as an appealing option. Similarly, these individuals are likely to perceive the challenges of starting a business as less daunting than those with more positive childhood experiences.

A history of frequent relocation was found to be a significant positive influence on the feasibility of starting a business. The adaptability and confidence that arise from having to adjust to new locations and situations or the experience gained in a variety of situations might predispose individuals to perceive self-employment as a feasible option, well within their capabilities. The underlying attitude changes that might explain these findings are not well researched.

Despite the significant findings of this paper, the amount of variation explained by these variables is quite small, a point also noted by Davidsson (1995) in his study. This suggests that much more research is required to understand why some young people develop an interest in starting a business while others prefer to seek employment.

Conclusions

Considerable research has established the significance of perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of starting a business on intentions. While our study confirms this conceptual model of entrepreneurial intentions, it also extends the model and finds that there are variables relating to childhood, other than a family background in business, which influence attitudes towards entrepreneurship. In particular, our results show the impact of a difficult childhood and frequent relocation on perceptions of starting a business.

The results of this study help explain the childhood factors that influence the development of entrepreneurial intentions. Models that explain how perceptions of entrepreneurship develop are important in identifying and designing intervention programmes to stimulate entrepreneurship. Obviously, we would not advocate that children should experience hardship or be moved around frequently so that they become more interested in starting a business. We do suggest, however, that if the attitudes that may arise from a difficult childhood and frequent relocation are well understood, improvements may be made in educational interventions that seek to influence entrepreneurship. While educational programmes designed to teach the skills necessary for self-employment are an important component in increasing levels of entrepreneurship, our study suggests that education at all levels, from primary to tertiary, should provide students with the opportunities to develop self-reliance, independence and resilience through activities

such as individual outdoor challenges, travel and event organization. These types of experiences are often part of the primary and secondary school curriculum, but are not typically part of most tertiary courses. Since it is at the tertiary level that students are directly confronting career choices, tertiary institutions should consider providing the opportunities for students to develop these critical traits.

This paper has contributed to the entrepreneurship literature by introducing new variables relating childhood experiences to the intentions model and assessing their impact on attitudes to entrepreneurship. Our findings are that a difficult childhood with challenging experiences, which could include such factors as loss of a parent, parental divorce or economic hardship, influence attitudes. Previous research has explained how a distant and rejecting father influences the development of entrepreneurial attitudes. Future research should examine other specific aspects of a difficult childhood in more depth to gain a greater understanding of how they are likely to influence the development of an entrepreneurial attitude. Such research would provide insight into how to develop (more positive) programmes to develop specific attributes that lead individuals to be more entrepreneurial.

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