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Who Becomes an Entrepreneur?

*by John Stanworth, Celia Stanworth, Bill Granger and
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THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PERENNIAL questions raised in the field of small business which have, to date, largely confounded attempts to answer them. Perhaps salient amongst these is the question of predicting the incidence of entrepreneurship itself. Many individuals express an interest in becoming their own boss, or even define this as some ideal state of affairs. But what separates out the minority who actually make the transition from employee status? In short, 'Who Becomes an Entrepreneur?'

It remains true that much of our knowledge in this area still relies on small packets of data collected as by-products of studies into broader issues such as entrepreneurial motivation, entrepreneurial training, gender and ethnicity, high-tech entrepreneurship, etc. Much still remains to be done (Cooper and Dunkelberg, 1987) both in co-ordinating such information as already exists and in extending it both in the direction of larger sample-sizes and greater in-depth sensitivity.

However, predictive patterns are now emerging with some consistency. This article examines a number of contributions to the field of debate and also presents some new data collected by the Future of Work Research Group at

the London Management Centre.

Psychological Models of the Entrepreneurial Personality

A number of psychologists have set out to identify a single personality trait or constellation of traits (elements of an individual's thinking, feeling or behaviour) capable of successfully predicting entrepreneurial behaviour patterns (Brockhaus, 1982 and Chell, 1987).

Perhaps the best known specific trait here is that associated with McClelland (1961) of 'Need Achievement' (n-Ach), which he described as 'a desire to do well for the sake of an inner feeling of personal accomplishment'. Despite some early promise, recent criticisms (Brockhaus, 1982) have cast doubt on the validity of the approach. The measurement of n-Ach by use of Thematic Apperception Tests (TAT) has been criticised on grounds of subjectivity and lack of consistency. Training designed to raise levels of n-Ach has been said to influence only surface behaviour and to have usually only temporary effects.

Another single trait approach is that which attempts to measure 'locus of control' or the extent to which people believe that they control their own

destinies. Studies of 'locus of control' have met with similar criticisms to those associated with Need Achievement but measures of the former tend to be more consistent and high measures of 'internal' locus of control correlate positively with business success. However, it has been claimed that it does not distinguish between entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs. Successful corporate managers who, it is claimed, display administrative rather than entrepreneurial skills, also exhibit high levels of internal locus of control (Brockhaus, 1982).

Two issues which would appear to still require elaboration here are: (i) locus of control scores, though reasonable consistent, may nonetheless shift over time in relation to longer term successes or setbacks suggesting 'locus of control' as essentially an indicator of 'current optimism and self-confidence' and (ii) existing confusion in distinguishing between 'administrative behaviour' in large firms and 'entrepreneurial behaviour' in small firms may say more about differences in firm size than actual behaviour patterns. The relevant behaviours recorded in large firms may in actual fact approximate to what is increasingly becoming known as 'intrapreneurship'.

Chell, a leading psychologist in the field of entrepreneurial study (1987), cites several weaknesses of the trait approach: "There would appear to be a great deal which is equivocal and inconclusive about the trait approach to entrepreneurship" (1985) and "There appears to be a very low correlation between the assessment of the trait and actual behaviour" (1986). Curran (1986), a sociologist, has come to the sober view that the prospect of further substantial

advances in our knowledge here, through research of this kind, represents 'a triumph of hope over experience'.

The Psychodynamic Model

Kets de Vries (1977), in a much cited piece of work, poses entrepreneurial behaviour as the outcome of early childhood experiences usually focusing on an unhappy family background leaving the resulting adult 'troubled by a burdensome psychological inheritance centred around problems of self-esteem, insecurity and lack of confidence'. A resulting inability to accept authority and work smoothly with others leads to the setting up of an independent economic unit as an act of 'innovative rebelliousness'.

Kets de Vries' entrepreneur 'bears no resemblance to that mythical creature of economic theory, the economic man'. Rather, his driving ambition is based on needs for independence and control, his autocratic becomes the 'tangible symbol... of his success in overcoming odds and assumes a much greater symbolic emotional significance than the reality of the situation may warrant'.

This approach may appear to cast the small businessman in a somewhat unfavourable light but accords quite strongly with elements contained in the writings of other researchers and theorists. For example, fifty years ago, Schumpeter (1934) posited entrepreneurship as often acting as a creative option for those faced with few alternative callings and for whom success promises raised self-esteem and a certain re-definition in the eyes of others. This process, however, he saw as likely to remain ultimately incomplete, resulting only in a raised economic standing to a higher level where still the

entrepreneurship has 'no cultural tradition or attitude to fall back upon'. In short, his 'loner' status may be retained.

Kets de Vries calls up assistance from Collins, More and Unwalls (1964) in stressing his non-conformist view of the character of the entrepreneur:

'... the way of the entrepreneur is a long, lonely and difficult road. The men who follow it are by necessity a special breed. They are a breed who cannot do well in the established and clearly defined routes available to the rest of us. The road they can follow is one that is lined with difficulties, which most of us could not even begin to overcome. As a group, they do not have the qualities of patience, understanding and charity many of us may admire and wish for in our fellows. This is understandable. In the long and trying way of the entrepreneur such qualities may come to be so much excess baggage. What is necessary to the man who travels this way is great imagination, fortitude, and hardness of purpose.

The men who travel the entrepreneurial way are, taken on balance, not remarkably likeable people. This too is understandable. As any one of them might say in the vernacular of the world of the entrepreneur, "Nice guys don't win"...

A criticism that has been levelled against the psychodynamic model is that it reduces down ultimately to a stereotypical image of the entrepreneur as someone unable to fit comfortably into conventional organisational life. However, this stereotype is not substantially dissimilar to that posed by the Bolton Committee (1971):

'...the small firm provides a productive outlet for the energies of

that large group of enterprising and independent people who set great store by economic independence and many of whom are anti-pathetic or less suited to employment in a large organisation but who have much to contribute to the vitality of the economy'.

The Social Marginality Model

Schumpeter (1934) pointed out that 'in all cases the meaning of economic action is the satisfaction of wants in the sense that there would be no economic action if there were no wants'. Further, Schumpeter stressed, in common with current-day sociological perspectives, that 'it is society that shapes the desires we observe' and that 'the field of individual choice is always... fenced in by social habits or conventions'.

Stanworth and Curran (1973) have applied the notion of 'social marginality' in an attempt to further our understanding of the processes of entry into entrepreneurship. This, they defined as a 'perceived incongruity between an individual's personal attributes and the role(s) they hold in society'. Chell (1986), in supporting the claims of this conceptual adaptation feels that the social marginality thesis can be applied, not only to groups in society, but also at a micro-level of individuals within an organisation. The social marginality thesis does not claim universal application but, rather, to explain the situation that occurs in a large number of cases. Further, it is a dynamic conceptualisation which can cope with changes occurring after entry into business.

Given that role selection and allocation processes in our society are far from perfect, it is not surprising that many feel

themselves misplaced. Historically, and even to the present day, there are whole groups in society who feel that many avenues of career opportunity are either closed or unattractive. In fact, Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis may be seen as the chronological antecedent with its emphasis on 'outsider' groups and individuals. For many, career choices are distinctly limited and, as Schumpeter pointed out, the appeal of self-employment 'is especially strong for people who have no other chance of achieving social distinction'. He added that, 'the sensation of power and independence loses nothing by the fact that both are largely illusions'. The social action perspective is based on the notion that social reality is socially created, socially maintained and socially changed, and thus is well able to accommodate this level of symbolism. Pecuniary gain, Schumpeter saw not as an end in itself but, more symbolically, as a generalised expression of success.

Social marginality theory suggests that those in society who perceive a strong level of incongruence between their personal attributes and the role/s they hold will be motivated to change or reconstruct their social reality. On occasions this may be done by embracing, say, political or religious doctrines which promise to re-define the world in terms more acceptable to the individual or group concerned. Others may consider self-employment which is an option open, on one shape or form, to even those with limited resources and qualifications.

The frequency with which self-employment is chosen appears to depend greatly upon two key factors. First, the range of absence of alternative economic roles available to the individual. Thus, downturns in the labour market appear

to result in upturns in the numbers of people becoming self-employed and vice-versa. Nonetheless, though self-employment is a widely held aspiration, relatively few still actually make the transition. Assuming the latter are not drawn from the population at random, we need an explanation. The evidence which follows is based on the theme of 'role-modelling'.

Inter-Generational Inheritance of Enterprise Culture Via Role-Modelling

The spirit of the process at work in the notion of inter-generational inheritance of enterprise or petite bourgeois culture is encapsulated in the following statement from the 1971 Bolton Report:

'...it is our impression that the general climate of opinion is now so antipathetic to business and particularly small business that except for those whose father is in business on his own account and for whom entry into small business is not only encouraged, but relatively easy, the tendency is for young people not to adopt independent business as a career'.

Thus, the assumption of an inter-generational link is certainly not new, yet little appears to be understood about the precise processes of 'cultural inheritance' involved, or indeed the precise scale on which this occurs amongst different social groups.

In a major study of social mobility in Britain, Goldthorpe et al (1987: 42) aggregated a number of occupational categories into a Social Class IV: "small proprietors, including farmers and small holders: self-employed artisans: and all other 'own account' workers apart from professionals. Class IV, in other words, may be equated with the 'petty

bourgeoisie'. The market situation of its members is distinctive by virtue of their employer or self-employed status..."

Applying a stringent test of intergenerational 'immobility', Goldthorpe et al found that, of their self-employed respondents, 27.2 per cent (or 36.5% if farmers and small holders are included) had fathers who were themselves self-employed *at the time the respondent was aged 14*. The authors concluded (1987: 258-9):

'In terms therefore of both absolute and relative mobility rates, it must be reckoned that there is a comparatively high probability of men who are at any one time found in Class IV positions being the sons of men who at some previous time also held such positions. And what this suggests to us is that a collectivity of individuals and families does exist in modern British society which is identifiable over time, if not always by the continuity by which its members occupy the self-employed positions of Class IV, then by what could be regarded as their 'tradition' of self-employment; that is to say, by their propensity to move into self-employment when opportunity arises and to do so, perhaps, in spite of previous disappointments or failures in self-employed ventures. It is in this sense, that the petty bourgeoisie can best be thought of as presently existing as a social formation within the British class structure'.

General Household Survey Data

A recent analysis of General Household Survey data by Curran and Burrows (1988) again confirmed this observation. Unfortunately, the General Household Survey data does not permit a completely accurate measure of petite

bourgeois inheritance from fathers because the data does not indicate the size of enterprise in which one of the two constituent groups ('employer-manager') worked. However, the authors estimated that around 35 per cent of *small business owners* had come from petite bourgeois backgrounds compared with only 20 per cent of employees interviewed in the survey. There was a small difference reported between the sexes, with female small business owners reporting rather lower levels of such experience for their fathers.

When the analysis turned to the *self-employed* (those with no employees), the picture altered in an interesting fashion. The figure for inter-generational inheritance was only 17 per cent overall suggesting that the self-employed 'come from a more varied range of backgrounds than small business owners'. Here it was the female respondents who exhibited the highest levels of inheritance of such experience through their father with a figure of 22 per cent compared with 15 per cent for males.

A preliminary suggestion of these figures is that those from entrepreneurial families do rather better in business generally than those emerging from different social origins. That is, the stronger the extent of inter-generational inheritance, the higher the likelihood of the business concerned creating employment. This general observation accords with recent evidence indicating higher survival rates amongst those with 'a network of family, relatives and/or friends who are themselves self-employed' (Hakim, 1988).

Franchising

Evidence for the inter-generational inheritance of petite bourgeois culture is

not restricted to conventional forms of self-employment and small business. Stanworth (1988), summarising data from two major research projects into franchising in Britain, reported that, at an aggregate level, slightly over one-third had had a father involved in self-employment/small business. This figure for petite bourgeois background rose to 55 per cent when previous direct experience of respondents themselves was added (i.e., previous self-employment).

This propensity for small business owners to make subsequent entries into self-employment after earlier failures appears quite common (as is suggested in the quotation above by Goldthorpe et al). A classic American study (Mayer and Goldstein, 1961) showed that, of a total sample of 81 new small businesses, nearly two-thirds (52) were set up in an operational field where the entrepreneur had previous experience or training. The interesting point here is that, of these, nearly half (23) had owned and run small businesses in the field in question previously. In a more recent American study of a sample of 368 small businesses spread across more than 20 States and various business sectors (Carland, et al, 1988), it was found that 100 (27%) had owned a business previously and, of these, half (51) had owned more than one business.

Cooper and Dunkelberg (1987) carried out a survey of 1,805 owner-managers drawn from a wide range of industries and geographical locations in the USA. Eight hundred and ninety had actually founded the business they were involved in and, of these, 50 per cent came from homes in which a parent or guardian owned a business.

Another study by Jacobowitz and Vidler

(1982) of 430 entrepreneurs ('a person who initiates and maintains a business venture') found that 72 per cent came from homes in which a parent or close relative owned a small business or were independent professionals. Further, during their last year at school, 63 per cent had been engaged in minor business or trading activities, such as stamp collection or newspaper delivery.

O'Farrell (1986), from a survey of manufacturing entrepreneurs in Ireland, observed that a disproportionately high percentage of new founders (46 per cent) had fathers who were self-employed compared with 13.5 per cent of the gainfully employed who were non-farmers and managers in 1971.

Donckels and Dupont (1987), in a study of new entrepreneurs in Belgium, studied a sample of 400 new small businesses and found that 45 per cent had an entrepreneurial father and 19 per cent an entrepreneurial mother. Other evidence points to broadly similar conclusions (Roberts and Wainer, 1971 and Shapero, 1971) which appear to hold across a wide range of cultures (Shapero & Sokel, 1982).

Gender

References to General Household Survey data above indicate that the process of inter-generational inheritance of enterprises culture is not gender specific and that whilst a smaller (albeit increasing) number of women than men stage an entry into business, levels of inter-generational role-modelling appear to be of substantially the same order. Watkins and Watkins (1984), in a study of 58 female entrepreneurs, found that 37 per cent had a father who had run a business of their own whilst 16 per cent of mothers of women in the sample also

had direct owner-business experience either on a completely independent basis or as a partner in a wider family-run firm. This, the authors claimed, compared with an average rate of female self-employment of around 4 per cent at the time (1979). The authors commented: 'These figures certainly support the view that an entrepreneurial father is as critical an element in the socialising influences on the female entrepreneur as on her male counterpart'.

Several studies of women entrepreneurs (Watkins & Watkins, 1984; Goffee & Scase, 1985; Cromie, 1987a, and Carter & Cannon, 1988) have reported high proportions of single and divorced/separated respondents amongst their samples which led to an, apparently premature, consensus concerning the meaning of entrepreneurship here as an escape from male dominance and dependence. For instance, Watkins & Watkins reported 48 per cent of their sample as married, 29 per cent divorced/separated, and 19 per cent single. Curran, Burrows & Evandrou (1987), in an analysis of 1980 General Household Survey data, found this claim to be discredited as a generalisation. They attribute the observation to 'non-random methods of sample construction' and small sample sizes but themselves revealed a higher-than-expected proportion of widows amongst the female small business owner sample. However, even this observation proved atypical when, in 1988, Curran and Burrows published a much broader analysis based on 6 years of GHS data (1979-84).

Ethnic Minorities

The inter-generational enterprise link appears to transcend gender and ethnic boundaries (Wilson & Stanworth, 1985

and 1988). However, Curran & Burrows (1988) caution against popular misconceptions on the latter:

'Although some ethnic groups clearly display markedly higher levels of small business ownership and self-employment than white British respondents, it should be stressed that between them all the ethnic minority groups provide less than 10 per cent of the (GHS) small business and self-employed sample. Thus, although *petit capitalism* is clearly an important source of employment for many ethnic groups, overall levels of ethnic participation in *petit capitalism* should not be exaggerated'.

Attempts to derive conclusions on the importance of sibling order appear inconclusive. Twenty seven of the 45 women in the Watkins and Watkins study, on whom such data was available, were first or only-born children. However, different patterns were observed for different family sizes. In two-child families, it was often the second child who became self-employed whereas, in larger families, it appeared to be often the first.

A tentative hypothesis here might run as follows. Smaller families are more likely to be of middle class origin and here setting up a small business may not be regarded wholeheartedly as a career success. For instance, it might be the first-born who becomes, say, a solicitor, and the second who is educationally less successful and becomes self-employed. Larger families, on the other hand, are more likely to conform to membership of the working class and here, entry into self-employment may be equated with upward social mobility and success and thus more likely to occur in the first-born. Obviously, the general observation

on the high achievement levels of first and only-born children is confused here inasmuch as setting up a small business can represent either upward or, alternatively, downward social mobility whereas the attainment of, say, Class I positions in the Goldthorpe et al social class hierarchy (as opposed to Class IV positions) would represent upward social mobility for all but the few with parents already occupying Class I positions.

Small Firms as Role Models

Two other factors emerge from a secondary data study of the origins of entrepreneurs. Firstly, the notion that those who form small businesses are likely to have previously worked in small firms and to have used them as yet another form of role-model. Donckels and Dupont found that 31 per cent of their sample worked for a firm employing less than 10 personnel immediately prior to starting up on their own and 60 per cent worked for firms with 50 employees or less. These figures compare with 17 and 38 per cent respectively of the Belgian private sector working population. Cromie (1987b) in a study conducted in Northern Ireland, produced rather more modest figures which were, nonetheless, taken to bear out the same point: 13 per cent of his sample had immediately previously worked in firms employing 10 or less and 45 per cent in firms employing 50 or less.

Cooper (1973) endorses this point about the small firm acting as an 'incubator' environment and extends it to include 'small businesses' within large firms. Here he is thinking particularly of small multi-functional units where individuals and teams practice and interface across a range of business activities.

Labour Market Turbulence

Finally, it has been widely noted that upsurges in the level of small business start-ups correlate positively with turbulence in the labour market, particularly unemployment or the threat of unemployment (Storey, 1982; Binks, 1983; Harrison & Hart, 1983). Again Cooper (1973) says:

'In brief surveys founders tend to report the socially acceptable reasons why they became founders, these include the desire for independence, financial gain, etc. However, depth interviews often disclose that the founder is 'pushed' from the parent organisation by frustration. In one study, 30 per cent of founders quit their previous jobs with no specific plans for the future: 13 per cent had to leave because of factors such as plant closures and an additional 40 per cent said they would have left their previous positions even if they had not become entrepreneurs'.

He added, along similar lines, the point that firms and industries afflicted with periodic crises tend to spawn entrepreneurs more than stable and well-managed businesses and business sectors: 'If the established firms are well managed and avoid periodic crises, there may be little incentive for potential founders to leave comfortable positions'. This may offer yet another reason why existing small firms themselves tend to spawn new small firms, reinforced by the fact that they tend to recruit staff from the secondary labour market anyway, thus recruiting the kinds of people who are statistically most likely to become founders.

On a final point, industries and geographical areas with high densities of entrepreneurial activity also appear likely

to have a role-modelling influence and this may well go at least part of the way towards explaining high levels of saturation in sectors such as retailing and, at the same time, the relatively low set-up rates in areas inhabited (or recently vacated by) a large employer/s (Mason, 1989).

New Data

This section sets out some of the initial findings of a London-based study, of over 600 respondents, investigating the process of small business start-up and the characteristics of those who attempt to do so. The research looked at 3 sub-samples: those already in business, those about to go into business and those known to be considering going into business.

Where father and mother were disaggregated, mothers were not usually self-employed without fathers also being self-employed.

Perhaps the most surprising observation here is the general overall strength of the role-model network and, particularly, the very high incidence of sibling involvement of self-employment. The latter observation is of particular interest since, in each of the three sub-groups, between one-half and two-thirds of respondents were first or second born indicating that many had only a single sibling and that he/she was often in business. In such cases, the degree of socialisation appears substantial.

Work by Watkins & Watkins (1984), mentioned earlier, indicated that an

TABLE 1
ROLE MODELS

Role	Respondents		
	In Business	About to go	Considering
Father	38%	47%	30%
Mother	13%	17%	14%
Father or Mother or both	43%	53%	34%
Brother/Sister	31%	27%	22%
Spouse	13%	14%	10%
Wider Family	31%	42%	28%
Close Friends	61%	61%	45%

Respondents were asked whether they had had any parent, sibling, spouse or close-friend role-models who were also self-employed. The results (see Table 1) indicate a consistently high presence of role-models, not only amongst family but also friends. As can be seen, between 30% and 47% across the three samples had a self-employed father and this compares with a figure of less than 20% for employees generally as reported by Curran and Burrows (1988) in their General Household Survey report.

unusually high proportion of those attracted to small business ownership may be only or first-born children. In fact, 27 of their sample of 45 women (i.e. 60%) fell into this category. There has long been a debate on the importance of sibling order and its relationship with success levels and strategies adopted to enhance external control (Box & Ford, 1967).

At the risk of over-simplification, it is argued that first or only-born children experience greater degrees of childhood

isolation than later born siblings. This is claimed to result, in later life, in higher levels of motivation to achieve recognition and control via manipulation of material objects rather than social skills and sociability.

In some ways this line of reasoning accords comfortably with the 'loner' status often attributed to the entrepreneur and the key entrepreneurial strategy of achieving control of his/her environment by means of the creation of an independent business.

However, data from the current study afforded no support whatsoever for this theory. In fact, the number of first and only born respondents was much as might be expected amongst the population as a whole.

In line with the American research results presented earlier, the current research found that 26% of those already in business had had a business venture previously. The figures for the other sub-groups were noticeably lower at 16% for those about to go and only 14% for those merely considering self-employment.

Although there was strong evidence of inter-generational inheritance of the spirit of enterprise, this did not extend to the line of business concerned. In fact, looking at the type of businesses respondents had set up or were thinking of setting up, only 11-16% in all 3 categories were in the same area as their father's previous business or occupation. Where respondents had had a business previously, the chances were high (57-78% across the 3 groups) of loyalty to the same business sector being maintained. Correlation levels with respondents first major job or occupation in employment were high (43-59%) across the 3 groups. It was noticeable that, amongst the group

already in business, commitment to previous main job or occupation was strongest at 59% and links with the line of the father's business or occupation were weakest at 11%. On a related point, those already in business were the least likely to state a 'hobby' as the source of their business idea (20% compared with 30% and 22% for the other groups).

Conclusion

As more data becomes available on entrepreneurial behaviour, the evidence increases for a sociological, rather than a psychological, explanation of enterprise. Socialisation patterns, particularly during childhood, but also later in worklife, appear to go a long way towards explaining the origins and motivations for enterprise. Given this observation, what is particularly required now is a better understanding of the dynamics of the socialisation process during childhood since this can influence future behaviour not only in the field of small business but large business also in the form of intrapreneurship.

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