



The “heart” of entrepreneurship: The impact of entrepreneurial action on health and health on entrepreneurial action



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ABSTRACT

Health is one of the most important topics in society. By exploring issues related to health we can gain a deeper understanding of the critical antecedents and consequences of entrepreneurial action. Specifically, we take a psycho-social perspective on health and our knowledge of the entrepreneurship literature to begin a conversation about, and hopefully stimulate research on, how health (of the entrepreneur and/or others) impacts entrepreneurial action and how entrepreneurial action creates (or diminishes) value (through the health of the entrepreneur and/or others). We hope this article stimulates scholars' curiosity on one of society's most critical issues.

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1. Introduction

It is an understatement to say that health is important to people's lives, and not surprisingly, scholars have been interested in exploring the issue. While some entrepreneurship research has touched upon the topic of health (e.g., [Boyd and Gumpert, 1983](#); [Kets de Vries, 1980](#)), we believe that there are ample opportunities to substantially expand this stream of research and in doing so make an important contribution to our understanding of entrepreneurial action—the pursuit of new business opportunities under uncertainty ([McMullen and Shepherd, 2006](#)). By health we refer to both physical health —“the physiological and physical status of the body”—and mental health—“the state of the mind, including basic intellectual functions” ([Ware et al., 1981](#)). While the topic of health in entrepreneurship can (and should) be explored at multiple levels (e.g., economic, inter-personal) to narrow the scope of our task in this paper to one that is more manageable we focus on *personal* health at the individual level because these aspects of health have a natural boundary—they “end at the skin” ([Ware et al., 1981](#)).

Health is not simply a topic largely overlooked by entrepreneurship scholars that could expand the boundaries of entrepreneurship at the field's periphery; rather, we believe it represents something more fundamental in the entrepreneurial context. Issues of health potentially underpin the inter-relationships (between individuals, actions, and opportunities) that are central to the field of entrepreneurship. That is, health issues (of entrepreneurs and/or others) can facilitate or obstruct entrepreneurial action from delivering value (to the entrepreneur and/or others). In this paper we make explicit the links between health and entrepreneurial action to offer an agenda for future research to generate new knowledge and shed light

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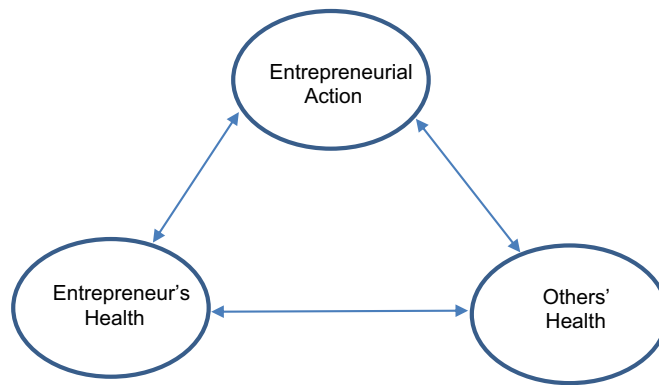


Fig. 1. A triadic framework of entrepreneurial action and health.

on some of the fundamental issues of entrepreneurship. Specifically, drawing on multiple, health-related streams of research from different disciplines, we propose a triadic model of entrepreneurial action and health in terms reciprocal linkages between entrepreneurial action, the health of the entrepreneur, and the health of others (see Fig. 1). From these linkages, we suggest potential points of departure for future research.

2. The impact of entrepreneurial action on the entrepreneur's health

Although the link between stress and health outcomes seems well established in the health literature (Faravelli and Pallanti, 1989; Hammen, 2005), there appear to be many unanswered questions when we consider this relationship in the context of entrepreneurial action. Stress refers to a relationship between the person and the environment (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) where the requirements of the situation exceed the person's resources and are appraised (by him or her) as involving harm, a threat of harm, or a challenge (Lazarus, 1990). There is some research connecting entrepreneurs to high levels of stress (e.g., Harris et al., 1999; Teoh and Foo, 1997); stress likely generated from the high work-load (Eden, 1975; Harris et al., 1999) and high business risk (Douglas and Shepherd, 2002) faced by entrepreneurs. However, other studies have found no significant difference between entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs in the level of strain experienced (Rahim, 1996), life stress (Parasuraman and Simmers, 2001), and some have even found that entrepreneurs experience less stress (Eden, 1975). Therefore, our understanding of the link between entrepreneurial action and the health of the entrepreneur can be enhanced through further investigation of the role of stress.

First, future research can explain heterogeneity in the extent to which entrepreneurs experience stress and/or the impact of stress on their health. The notion of resilience is a great place to start. Resilient individuals are, in the face of adversity, loss, and/or trauma, able to maintain a relatively stable (normal) trajectory of psychological and physical functioning over time (Bonanno, 2004; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003). Future research can investigate the extent to which resilient people are more likely to take entrepreneurial action. Alternatively, or in conjunction, it could be that those who engage in entrepreneurial action begin to develop psychological and emotional capabilities that build resilience and this resilience either reduces stress or reduces the negative impact of stress on their health. This line of research can help us understand why some entrepreneurs develop resilience while others do not or are slow in doing so as an explanation for heterogeneity in health outcomes. Indeed, blending the resilience literature with the literature on bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005), assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 2010), and/or positive psychology (Seligman et al., 2005) may provide a theoretical basis for this important stream of research.

Second, future research can explain heterogeneity in the relationship between entrepreneurial action and the entrepreneur's health by exploring the nature of the entrepreneurial tasks and roles and/or the entrepreneur's fit with those tasks or roles. For example, Brigham et al. (2007) found that entrepreneurs had higher levels of satisfaction when their dominant decision making style complemented the formalization and structure of their firms. Therefore, entrepreneurs and ventures differ and it is likely the fit between the two that will help explain an entrepreneur's health issues. Although we are beginning to gain a deeper understanding of the many tasks of the entrepreneurial role (Chen et al., 1998) and how these might change over time as the venture matures (Shepherd et al., 2000) and grows (Wasserman, 2008), and as the entrepreneur prepares for exit (DeTienne, 2010), there is still ample opportunity for more fine grained research linking these micro-activities of entrepreneurial action (Shepherd, 2015) to entrepreneurs' health.

Finally, although the link between stress and health outcomes is well established at high levels of stress, future research can deepen our understanding of this relationship. If lower levels of stress can enhance health (Quick et al., 1987), then future research can make an important contribution by exploring at what level of stress does it become unhealthy for entrepreneurs and by explaining heterogeneity across entrepreneurs in their "optimal" level of stress [in terms of health]. Despite events generating high levels of stress, perhaps some entrepreneurs can rapidly deal with that stress and thereby

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