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Observe, innovate, succeed: A learning perspective on innovation and the performance of entrepreneurial chefs

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ABSTRACT

Literature on the role of observational or vicarious learning is extensive, but little research has focused on learning for entrepreneurs in a demanding, competitive context. This article investigates how different competent models influence the innovation behavior of entrepreneurs in the context of haute cuisine. Further, we evaluate how much these innovative choices influence the performance of the restaurants. A total of 55 gourmet restaurant chefs were sampled using two Gourmet Magazine rankings of the top 50 US restaurants. Multiple sources of archival data were coded: chefs' profiles for the observation of competent models; press articles for innovation (as novelty, product, process and service innovation); and the restaurant's position in the Gourmet ranking for performance. This paper makes two unique contributions: (1) Entrepreneurs learn to innovate vicariously through observing competent models (parents and mentors but not academic models); and (2) Innovation mediates the relationship between the observation of models and the performance.

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1. Introduction

Innovative entrepreneurs make a difference in every economy (Ribeiro Soriano & Huarng, 2014), yet how they acquire these innovative tendencies remains an unexplored area of inquiry. According to Minniti and Bygrave (2001, p. 7), “entrepreneurship is a process of learning, and a theory of entrepreneurship requires a theory of learning”. In the past decade, several studies have focused on the link between learning and entrepreneurship (Cope, 2005; Corbett, 2005; Holcomb, Ireland, Holmes, & Hitt, 2009; Sardana & Scott-Kemmis, 2010) while at the same time overlooking the antecedents of learning innovation. For example, although in the entrepreneurship literature, it is well accepted that learning processes are an important driver of entrepreneurs' success (Ireland, Hitt, Camp, & Sexton, 2001), empirical studies investigating learning models for innovation (e.g., a parent or a mentor) are still rare (Ravasi & Turati, 2005). In this paper, we examine how entrepreneurs vicariously learn innovation and how this innovation leads to performance. Vicarious learning such as the observation of models (Gioia & Manz, 1985) is particularly important for entrepreneurs, especially early in life and when new challenges become demanding (Bingham & Davis, 2012). Learning prior to start up is a particularly interesting alternative to learning by doing, which can only take place once the business is established (Cope, 2005). By observing learning models, entrepreneurs rely on others' experiences, engage in

cognitive rehearsal, and act accordingly when faced with similar demanding situations (Baum, Li, & Usher, 2000).

Vicarious learning has been documented as a key learning mechanism for both individuals and firms. What is missing from this body of research, however, is an empirically grounded understanding of the role of vicarious learning in entrepreneurs learning innovation, particularly because vicarious learning was recognized as being particularly appropriate for exploration (Bingham & Davis, 2012). We therefore focus on two research questions: how do entrepreneurs learn innovation vicariously and how does this innovation influence entrepreneurial performance?

To answer these questions, we examine the haute cuisine sector and, more specifically haute cuisine chefs' profiles, innovations, and performance. We focus on this industry because it is an “extreme case” example and a very useful context for understanding the mechanism underlying entrepreneurs' vicarious learning of innovation and its effect on performance. Haute cuisine is a very competitive context: creativity and innovation are essential (Svejenova, Mazza, & Planellas, 2007), and copying is virtually excluded through a norms-based intellectual property system (Fauchart & Von Hippel, 2008). In addition, haute cuisine is a setting where apprenticeship and mentoring are central to the development process of chefs (James, 2006).

We sampled a total of 55 restaurants chefs using two Gourmet Magazine rankings of the top 50 US restaurants and tested the effects of vicarious learning (through the observation of models at different stages of life) on innovation and performance. We assessed both vicarious learning (through the chefs' profiles) and innovation – i.e., novelty (as defined as “how new?”), product innovations, process innovations,

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and service innovations – through an extensive coding of press articles referring to each chef–restaurant dyad under analysis (published during the 5 years prior to the ranking). Chef entrepreneurial performance was operationalized as the restaurant's position in the Gourmet ranking.

In the next section, we review the literature on vicarious learning and the role that learning plays in innovation and performance, and we propose hypotheses regarding the mediating role of innovation on the relationship between vicarious learning and performance. Next, we detail our methodology and the results of our analyses. Finally, we discuss the results and implications and outline avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Vicarious learning theory: Learning through the observation of models

Bandura (1977, p. 35) defines vicarious learning as a process where “by observing a model of the desired behavior, an individual forms an idea of how response components must be combined and sequenced to produce the new behavior”. Vicarious learning is a type of social learning in which the individual learns through observation without directly performing the behavior or experiencing the consequences (Bandura, 1977; Manz & Sims, 1981). Vicarious learning is more than just imitation of a behavior. It is the observation of the behaviors of models, the perception of the effects of that model's behavior (positive or negative), and then the observer's reproduction of successful behaviors and avoidance of unsuccessful ones.

Learning by observing occurs for individuals (Bandura, 1977) and organizations (e.g., Baum et al., 2000; Gioia & Manz, 1985; Srinivasan, Haunschild, & Grewal, 2007; Terlaak & Gong, 2008), and these findings can be extended to entrepreneurial contexts. In fact, vicarious learning through the observation of models (Gioia & Manz, 1985) is particularly important early in life and when new challenges become demanding (Bingham & Davis, 2012).

Existing research has focused on numerous types of behavior but not on innovation. In the field of entrepreneurship, vicarious learning is seen as a particularly appropriate learning mode for exploration (rather than for exploitation) (Bingham & Davis, 2012).

This paper focuses on entrepreneurs' learning of a specific type of behavior (i.e., innovation) from different competent models with which they interact at the beginning of their career. We focus on three competent models that result from the literature: parents, academic models and mentor models. In addition, we will test whether learning innovation vicariously leads entrepreneurs to innovate and perform. We summarize these arguments in three sets of hypotheses: the first on vicarious learning for innovation; the second on the effect of innovation on performance; and the third on the mediating effects of innovation on the relationship between vicarious learning and performance.

2.2. Vicarious learning of innovation through the observation of models at early stages of an entrepreneur's life

It is well accepted that learning processes are a fundamental and integral part of the entrepreneurial process (Rae, 2005; Ravasi & Turati, 2005) and that this process is initiated in the early stages of an entrepreneur's life (Rae, 2005). In these early stages, information is scarce and uncertainty is high, and entrepreneurs try to find effective and costless mechanisms to overcome these limitations, which makes vicarious learning through the observation of models particularly appropriate (Baum et al., 2000; Bingham & Davis, 2012; Srinivasan et al., 2007). These models are parents (Rae, 2005; White, Thornhill, & Hampson, 2007), academic models (Marvel & Lumpkin, 2007; Roberts, 2010) and mentors (Ozgen & Baron, 2007; Whitley, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). We therefore propose that entrepreneurs learn to be innovative vicariously at different stages of their life and career.

2.3. Vicarious learning from parental models

Rae (2005) used thematic discourse analysis to interpret narratives of entrepreneurs with the aim of finding an explicative framework for entrepreneurial learning. The findings reveal a triadic model based on *personal and social emergence*, *contextual learning*, and the *negotiated enterprise*. According to Rae, *personal and social emergence* is the development of entrepreneurial identity, which includes early life and family exposure. It was also found that very often, entrepreneurial stories, which are constructed with reference to personal relationships with parents, spouses, and children, reinforce the importance of the parental models for the construction of the entrepreneurial identity.

White et al. (2007, p. 452) also supported this point in a model where entrepreneurship is explained by the *nurture* and *nature* effects. The *nurture* effect is based on social learning theory, which argues that parents act as role models: “role modeling, imitation, basic values or utilities passed from parents to child”. Therefore, parents are viewed as a central model for the development of the entrepreneur identity for nascent entrepreneurs. We argue that innovation is a behavior that is learnt by entrepreneurs through the observation of the parental model.

Hypothesis 1a. *There is a positive relationship between the observation of the parental model and innovation.*

2.4. Vicarious learning from academic models

During their academic education, students are exposed to a complex social environment where they learn vicariously through discussions, conflicts, challenges, and story-telling, among other interactions. In schools and universities, individuals can learn from others' experiences, observing not only lecturers and professors but also more experienced students and peers (Roberts, 2010). Roberts (2010) reviews the literature on vicarious learning in nursing and finds that the behavior learnt is the nursing practices and the models are the lecturer and peers. In the context of cuisine, schools and particularly teachers are also recognized as conducive to culinary creativity (Hornig & Lee, 2009).

Marvel and Lumpkin's (2007) study focuses on the relationship between high-technology entrepreneurs' formal education levels and innovation radicalness. Their findings reveal that radical innovation was positively associated with formal education level. The more educated the entrepreneur is, the more radical is its innovation.

Based on the relationship between academic models and practices (Hornig & Lee, 2009; Roberts, 2010) and the relationship between education level and innovation radicalness (Marvel & Lumpkin, 2007), we propose a model for the vicarious learning of innovation through academic models. Based on the importance of vicarious learning in academic education and the relevance of academic education for innovation, we argue that the vicarious learning of innovation takes place in the academic setting, where professors and colleagues are viewed as competent models: entrepreneurs learn innovation vicariously from professors and colleagues.

Hypothesis 1b. *There is a positive relationship between the observation of academic models and innovation.*

2.5. Vicarious learning from mentor models

Early career mentors are extremely valuable for their protégés because they help them not only to avoid needless dangers but also to acquire useful skills and knowledge (Clutterbuck & Ragins, 2002). It was also demonstrated that mentors can help their protégés to advance in their careers more rapidly, earn higher salaries, and achieve greater recognition (Whitley et al., 1991).

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