



Measuring the social identity of entrepreneurs: Scale development and international validation



Philipp Sieger^{a,*}, Marc Gruber^b, Emmanuelle Fauchart^{b,c}, Thomas Zellweger^d

^a University of Bern, Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, Engehaldenstrasse 4, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

^b Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Station 5, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

^c University of Strasbourg, 61 Avenue de la Forêt Noire, F-67000 Strasbourg, France

^d University of St.Gallen, Center for Family Business, Dufourstrasse 40a, CH-9000 St.Gallen, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Social identity theory offers an important lens to improve understanding of founders as enterprising individuals, the venture creation process, and its outcomes. Yet, further advances are hindered by the lack of valid scales to measure founders' social identities. Drawing on social identity theory and a systematic classification of founders' social identities (Darwinians, Communitarians, and Missionaries), we develop and test a corresponding 15-item scale in the Alpine region and validate it in 13 additional countries and regions. The scale allows identifying founders' social identities and relating them to processes and outcomes in entrepreneurship. The scale is available online in 16 languages.

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Executive summary

Firm founders have the freedom to pursue the types of opportunities that match their own preferences, choose the way in which they want to exploit their opportunities, and pursue the goals they have set for themselves. In other words, given that founders can put a lot of “themselves” into their enterprising activities, new firms become important reflections of the meanings that founders associate with entrepreneurship. Although an increasing number of scholars have turned to the identity concept and investigate how it can inform our understanding of founders as enterprising individuals, of firm creation processes, and of outcomes in entrepreneurship, further progress in this promising research area is severely hindered because we lack validated scales that could capture the social identities of founders. Given that the social identity concept is multidimensional, we require comprehensive and precise measurement instruments in order to obtain valid insights on founders' social identities and how they relate to organizational phenomena.

Hence, to help advance theoretical understanding and empirical research on founders' social identities, the present study develops and validates a scale for measuring founder social identities. In particular, our scale development benefitted from the availability of a rigorous qualitative study that has drawn on social identity theory to systematically assess, investigate, and describe the salient social identities of founders (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). This prior work not only provides a compelling typology

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: philipp.sieger@imu.unibe.ch (P. Sieger), marc.gruber@epfl.ch (M. Gruber), efauchart@gmail.com, efauchart@unistra.fr (E. Fauchart), thomas.zellweger@unisg.ch (T. Zellweger).

of founders' social identities (labelled *Darwinian*, *Communitarian*, and *Missionary* identities), but also offers detailed insights into the different dimensions and the specific content of these social identities. It thus gave us solid guidance for the development of a scale that can capture these social identities – and of social identities that contain different elements of Darwinian, Communitarian, and Missionary identities (the “hybrid” types).

We test and demonstrate the validity of our founder social identity scale through a series of analyses following established scale development procedures (Hinkin, 1995, 2005, 1998; Edwards, 2001). Specifically, we first use a sample of founders from the Western European Alpine region (where the original research on founders' social identities was conducted, cf. Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) to test and validate the scale. We then corroborate the stability of this scale with an unusually comprehensive validation effort that comprised data collection in 12 countries representing major parts of the world (Brazil, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Spain) and from the Anglo-American region (Australia, Canada, UK, and the US). In total, our data comprises 9431 individuals engaged in new firm creation activities.

By offering a valid scale, our study allows scholars to obtain reliable results in their survey research on social identities of founders and to advance theory development in entrepreneurship and related domains with their empirical insights. In other words, with this methodological advance, we thus reach an important milestone in the quest for an improved understanding not just of the role of founders' social identity in new firm creation, but also of entrepreneurship as an important societal phenomenon. For instance, scholars can use the scale to identify founders' social identities and relate these identities to firm-level processes and outcomes. Scholars may also link the identified social identities to other levels of analysis such as industries (e.g., industry evolution) or whole economies (e.g., economic growth).

The 15 items of our final scale are available online (<http://www.cfb.unisg.ch/scale>) in the following languages: Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovenian, and Spanish. Additional translations can be sent to the corresponding author in order to be added to this list.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is one of the most intriguing phenomena in our societies, in no small part because it offers individuals the freedom of personal expression – firm founders have the freedom to pursue those types of opportunities that match their own preferences, choose the way in which they want to exploit their opportunities, and pursue the goals that they have set for themselves. In other words, given that founders can put a lot of “themselves” into their enterprising activities, entrepreneurship can be regarded as an important manifestation of the human self and new firms become important reflections of the meanings that founders associate with entrepreneurship (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

In order to shed light on the self-concepts of entrepreneurs and to understand how they shape firm creation processes and outcomes, a quickly growing number of studies have turned to identity theory (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009; Conger et al., 2012; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Murnieks and Mosakowski, 2007; Farmer et al., 2011; Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Navis and Glynn, 2011; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Whereas almost all of the work to date adopts a role identity perspective to inform its theorizing, studies employing social identity theory are just beginning to emerge (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Powell and Baker, 2014). As Fauchart and Gruber (2011, p. 935) point out, the “social aspects of a founder's self-concept are likely to be of importance in entrepreneurship because firm creation is an inherently social activity, and organizations are themselves social constructions (Whetten and Mackey, 2002).”

Yet, although an increasing number of scholars have turned to the identity concept and investigate how it can inform our understanding of founders as enterprising individuals, of firm creation processes, and of outcomes in entrepreneurship, further progress in this promising research area is severely hindered because scholars lack validated scales that could capture the social identities of founders. Given that the social identity concept is multidimensional, we require comprehensive and precise measurement instruments in order to obtain valid insights on founders' social identities and how they relate to organizational phenomena. Absent valid measurement instruments, scholars run the risk of developing an incorrect understanding of social identities and of publishing results that would later on be questioned due to measurement problems (Hinkin, 2005). As Korman (1974, p. 194) put it: “The point is not that adequate measurement is ‘nice’. It is necessary, crucial, etc. Without it we have nothing.”

Hence, to advance research on founders' social identities, the present study develops and validates a scale for measuring the social identities of founders. In particular, our scale development benefitted from the availability of a rigorous qualitative study that has drawn on social identity theory to systematically assess, investigate, and describe the salient social identities of founders (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). This prior work not only provides a compelling typology of founders' social identities (labelled *Darwinian*, *Communitarian*, and *Missionary* identities), but also offers detailed insights into the different dimensions and the specific content of these social identities. It thus gave us solid guidance for the development of a scale that can capture these social identities – and of social identities that contain different elements of Darwinian, Communitarian, and Missionary identities (the “hybrid” types). These hybrid types are of research interest in their own right, as they may contain, for example, elements that create important tensions within an individual (e.g., “how much should I emphasize the profit motive vs. helping the world to become a better place?”) and that will affect the firm creation activity (e.g., “should I pick the low-cost producer as my supplier or the environmentally-friendly, higher-cost producer?”). For instance, an investigation of the hybrid social identities of founders could help us in developing an improved understanding of hybrid organizations, including hybrid social ventures (Miller et al., 2012; Battilana and Lee, 2014).

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