

INVESTIGATING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS: A STUDY OF YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

An examination of the entrepreneurial attitudes of African American business students from multiple universities was conducted. Entrepreneurial attitudes were measured with the Entrepreneurial Attitudes Orientation (EAO) scale. Findings indicate that African American students have very high entrepreneurial attitudes compared with the validation sample of the EAO, and that these attitudes are even higher among those who have had prior entrepreneurial exposure via a family-owned or self-owned business. These findings are believed to be consistent with current rates of minority-started businesses and known intergenerational linkages in business ownership.

Introduction

As noted in multiple reports from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), entrepreneurs throughout the world often pursue business ownership either based on opportunity recognition or necessity due to the lack of viable economic alternatives. Consistent with this, research has indicated that minorities are seeking out more entrepreneurial opportunities as a way to overcome the frustration and discontent from the lack of advancement opportunities in large organizations (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001; Heilman & Chen, 2003). These ventures not only benefit individual investors, but also serve to improve overall market efficiency and innovativeness. While these numbers indicate that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well internationally, research indicates that many more people have entrepreneurial potential than ever actually become entrepreneurs (Kent, 1990). Of special concern is the degree to which African Americans may experience barriers that limit their potential in the entrepreneurial sector.

Before addressing potential obstacles historically faced by African Americans in regards to business ownership, it first important to understand the importance of entrepreneurship for minority groups. As suggested by Acs, Tarpley and Phillips (1998), a primary contribution of entrepreneurial ventures is to allow minorities to enter the economic and social mainstream of American society. Similarly, past research has argued that the health and growth of African American-owned small businesses often serves as a strong barometer for the overall progress made by minorities in the U.S. (Feldman, Koberg & Dean, 1991; Thompson, 1999).

From a legal perspective, the passage of the Small Business Act has impacted the number of minorities who have considered entrepreneurship as a viable career choice. The Act proposes a relationship between training courses and small business development, which suggests that the actual and potential capacity of small business is encouraged and enhanced by the use of training (Martin, Wech, Sandefur & Pan, 2006). As a result of the governmental and educational initiatives, the number of opportunities for African Americans to receive training and education for small business development has substantially increased over the last three decades. Recent evidence seems to indicate that minority entrepreneurship has steadily increased during the past

decade, with estimations that currently 30% of small businesses in the U.S. are owned by women or minorities (Bergman, 2006). Furthermore, numerous GEM reports extol the importance of involving minorities in the entrepreneurial process as it can play an important role in accelerating the overall pace of entrepreneurial activity within an economy (Reynolds, Camp, Bygrave, Autio, & Hay, 2001).

To date, little research has empirically examined the entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions of African Americans, particularly young adults. In fact, despite their recent increased involvement in business ownership, past research has indicated that minorities tend to be less optimistic overall in their expectations of business success (Carter, 2000), and are more likely to fail when starting a new venture (Carter, Williams & Reynolds, 1997; Boden & Nucci, 2000; Robb, 2002). Thompson (2004) points out that successful entrepreneurship requires a combination of temperament, talent and technique. It can be argued that temperament is first needed in order to convince African Americans of their potential in the entrepreneurial arena, and to encourage them to view business ownership as a viable career option. Thus, a stronger understanding of the entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions of young adults in the African American population can make an important contribution to the entrepreneurship research body.

Literature Review

The study of entrepreneurship may include consideration of numerous contextual factors, including both environmental and individual characteristics. Past areas of focus for entrepreneurial research have included geographical location, regional policies, access to resources and support programs, family history, educational levels, personality traits, attitudes, ethnicity, and gender. The current study considers two of these individual factors, specifically attitudes and ethnicity.

The work of Robinson, Stimpson, Huefner, and Hunt (1991) was one of the first to incorporate an attitude scale to predict entrepreneurial activity. An advantage of using an attitude approach is that it can be more domain-specific, which increases the correlation with actual behavior and reduces unexplained variability. Attitudes tend to change across time and situations through an interactive process with the environment, and once a person's attitude has been measured, a prediction can be made about the person's future actions (Carlson, 1985). Robinson et al. (1991) developed the Entrepreneurial Attitude Orientation (EAO) model based on the four constructs of achievement, innovation, personal control, and self esteem in business.

Past research suggests that both females (Hisrich & Brush, 1987; Carter, 2000; Thomas, 2001) and minorities (Kourilsky & Esfandiari, 1997; Heilman & Chen, 2003) are faced with more obstacles in the entrepreneurial process, such as less education and business experience, limited resources, and fewer mentors and advisors. In addition, they have greater difficulty obtaining loans (Verheul & Thurik, 2001; Coleman, 2002) and have less of a credit history (Shaw, Carter & Brierton, 2001). Research has also indicated that minorities are less interested in starting a business (Matthews & Moser, 1995; Kourilsky & Walstad, 1997) and when they do it tends to be smaller and more likely to be in the retail or service sectors (Perry, 2002), where failure rates are much higher than other business sectors (Brush & Chaganti, 1999). Robb (2002) and Marlow and Patton (2005) suggests that this occupational segregation may result from the capital restraints faced by many minority entrepreneurs.

In addition to resource constraints, two critical challenges, which may be somewhat linked together, are the skill deficiencies of minority groups in regards to entrepreneurship, and the dearth of role models and mentors available within local communities. Over a decade ago Kourilsky and Esfandiari (1997) noted that although African American youth reported they would like to explore the opportunity of starting their own business, they lacked a strong understanding of basic entrepreneurial knowledge. While the good news is that entrepreneurial attitudes and skills can be developed through entrepreneurship education programs (Robinson et al., 1991; Mitra & Matlay, 2004), research has shown that education and skill differentials can help explain why certain people engage in entrepreneurial activities and are more successful than others (Farmer, 1997; Gatewood, Shaver, Powers & Gartner, 2002; Carter, Gartner, Shaver & Gatewood, 2003).

If Kourilsky and Esfandiari (1997) are correct and skill deficiencies stop minorities from considering business ownership, then the resulting effect can be a limited supply of positive role models for young adults. In fact, research by Heilman and Chen (2003) found a general lack of mentors and mentoring opportunities for potential minority entrepreneurs. Research indicates that a strong support network and a positive relationship with a mentor can help prospective business owners learn the skills needed to successfully operate and manage a small business. Minorities may have fewer opportunities to engage in professional relationships with mentors because of cross cultural differences or the unwillingness of other minority leaders to participate in mentoring relationships (Heilman & Chen, 2003).

The entrepreneurial sector can be an important source of future opportunity for minority groups. Prior research has indicated that the skills and techniques of minorities need more development in order to achieve greater levels of future success. While this is a pressing problem, it is equally important to gain a better understanding of the attitudes of young African American adults toward entrepreneurship in order to determine their future entrepreneurial intentions.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

A target area for collecting data for this study was students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCUs have played a crucial role in the rise of black entrepreneurship. These institutions have been “seats of black progress” because of their supportive campus environment and open opportunity structures (Bennett & Xie, 2003). Research on the graduates supported by the United Negro College Fund have reported high levels of satisfaction with HBCUs and have frequently stated that they have prepared “them well for participation in society” (Butler, 1991). It additionally observed that the upward economic and social mobility of HBCU graduates is, in many respects, reminiscent of the experiences of immigrant ethnic groups that have pursued the American Dream through higher education and entrepreneurship (Butler, 1991).

Evaluating the relationship between attendance at HBCUs and those who become successful entrepreneurs reveals two opposing viewpoints. From one perspective, many believe that native-born African Americans have failed to develop a tradition of entrepreneurship for a variety of reasons, most notably the lack of opportunities to gain experience in “buying and selling” (Frazier, 1949), a dearth of business “success symbols” (Foley, 1966), and the absence of a cultural heritage (Light, 1972). Thus, this viewpoint embraces the idea that successful African American businesses is one of a tradition of successful individuals, rather than one based upon a collective experience (Light, 1972).

Another perspective examining the relationship between attendance at HBCUs and entrepreneurship attitudes embraces the view that a small class of mostly Southern blacks has followed a tradition of self-help and entrepreneurship, inspired by the idea, espoused by Booker T. Washington, that they could “take advantage of the disadvantages” of racial oppression (Butler, 1991). This counterargument holds that active participation in the educational, religious, and fraternal organizations of the segregated black communities of the South has been a hallmark of this select group of black entrepreneurs and that attendance at HBCUs has been central to this heritage (Butler, 1991). It suggests that the formation and continued existence of this class – particularly in the South, where blacks have faced their greatest disadvantages – have been tied closely to involvement in the institutions that its members have collectively supported, most notably HBCUs (Boyd, 2007).

Hypotheses

Despite the discrepancies highlighted in previous literature, we believe the attraction of entrepreneurship will be positive among college-age African Americans. Various GEM reports suggest that ethnic entrepreneurship is on the rise in many regions of the world. While African Americans are disproportionately underrepresented as small business owners in the U.S., the growth rate of African American-owned small businesses is quite high (Martin et al., 2006). In addition, Sriram, Tigineh and Herron (2007) suggest that entrepreneurial opportunities are critically important within the African America community as a means of overcoming the stagnation in our national economy, particularly in urban areas. This leads one to believe that many young African American adults are interested in entrepreneurship and view it as a legitimate career opportunity. As such, we offer the following hypothesis:

H1: African American students will possess entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions that are stronger than those of student entrepreneurs in general.

Past research has established a link between entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions and past business experience and exposure. This may include direct work experience or indirect experience through a family business. Past studies have shown that both work experience with a small business (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003) and a family business (Reitan, 1997) can have a positive impact on perceptions of new venture feasibility and desirability. In addition, Gatewood and Shaver (1991) found that self-confidence and motivation can be affected by experience and past business results. Since research has shown that entrepreneurial attitudes can change (Robinson et al., 1991), prior personal experience or other forms of contact may play a significant role in shaping these attitudes. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Past entrepreneurial experience and exposure to entrepreneurial activities will result in stronger entrepreneurial attitudes for African American students that have experienced them than for those who have not.

Method

Participants

Participants were 93 individuals who were enrolled in business courses during the spring and summer 2009 semesters at several universities in the southeast U.S. The sample was 46% male, with an average age of 25. The participants came from all class levels, with the largest percentage classified as seniors (45%), followed by graduate students (29%), juniors (18%), sophomores (4%) and freshman (4%).

Measures

We measured entrepreneurial attitudes with the Entrepreneurial Attitudes Orientation survey instrument (Robinson et al., 1991). The EAO is theoretically well grounded and provides a composite score based on four attitude subscales: 1) Achievement in business refers to concrete results associated with the start-up of a business (Cronbach's alpha = .84), 2) Perceived personal control of business outcomes concerns one's perception of control or influence over his or her business (Cronbach's alpha = .70), 3) Innovation in business relates to acting on business activities in novel ways (Cronbach's alpha = .90), and 4) Perceived self-esteem in business which relates to self-confidence with regard to one's business affairs (Cronbach's alpha = .73). The four subscales have been shown to produce 77% accuracy in predicting entrepreneurship (Robinson et al., 1991).

In addition to completing the EAO, participants provided demographic information including gender, age, class standing, previous exposure to entrepreneurial organizations, and information related to their future entrepreneurial intentions. In order to measure prior exposure to entrepreneurial initiatives, two questions were asked related to this: 1) Has your family ever owned a small business? & 2) Do you currently own a small business or have you ever owned a small business in the past?

Analyses

Since the primary interest of the study was to examine differences between our African American student population and the scores of student entrepreneurs used in the original validation of the EAO, t-tests were used to compare the means of each group on each of the attitudes and intentions of interest.

Results

Hypothesis one was supported in all but one instance; African American students possessed significantly stronger entrepreneurial attitudes than did the EAO's overall validation group. In the one exception, entrepreneurial self-esteem, the African American students were not significantly different, indicating that they possessed comparable entrepreneurial orientation in this arena. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for all of the dependent variables of interest - the four entrepreneurial attitudes for the current study. Table 1 also indicates the results of the t-test for differences between our sample and the validation sample used to create the EAO.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Entrepreneurial Attitudes

		Mean	Std. Dev.	t	Mean Diff.
Entrepreneurial Innovation *	African Americans	7.10	1.02	7.78	.82
	Validation Sample	6.2			
Entrepreneurial Achievement *	African Americans	8.18	1.25	11.40	1.48
	Validation Sample	6.7			
Entrepreneurial Personal Control *	African Americans	8.06	1.50	10.67	1.66
	Validation Sample	6.4			
Entrepreneurial Self-esteem	African Americans	6.62	1.68	-.45	-.08
	Validation Sample	6.7			

*Significant at $p < .05$.

Hypothesis two examined whether or not prior exposure to entrepreneurial activities was associated with stronger entrepreneurial attitudes within the current sample population. This supposition was supported for all entrepreneurial attitudes except entrepreneurial self-esteem. For self-esteem, having exposure via a family business or having one's own business was not associated with significantly stronger entrepreneurial attitudes. Table 2 provides both the descriptive statistics, as well as the results of the significance testing, for this hypothesis.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Entrepreneurial Attitudes & Prior Exposure

	Has anyone in your immediate family ever owned a small business?		Mean	Std. Dev.	t	Mean Diff.
	Yes	No				
Entrepreneurial Innovation *	Yes	44	7.26	.88	2.21	.45
	No	49	6.80	1.10		
Entrepreneurial Achievement *	Yes	44	8.50	1.21	2.41	.61
	No	49	7.89	1.23		
Entrepreneurial Personal Control *	Yes	44	8.43	1.32	2.40	.71
	No	49	7.73	1.59		
Entrepreneurial Self-esteem	Yes	44	6.95	1.68	1.84	.63
	No	49	6.32	1.63		

	Do you own a small business or have in the past?		Mean	Std. Dev.	T	Mean Diff.
	Yes	No				
Entrepreneurial Innovation *	Yes	12	7.97	.71	4.69	1.09
	No	81	6.88	.98		
Entrepreneurial Achievement *	Yes	12	8.98	.88	3.18	.92
	No	81	8.06	1.26		
Entrepreneurial Personal Control *	Yes	12	9.08	.92	3.74	1.17
	No	81	7.91	1.51		
Entrepreneurial Self-esteem	Yes	12	7.15	1.66	1.18	.61
	No	81	6.54	1.67		

*Significant at $p < .05$.

Discussion

Given the realities of the current economy, the job market which college graduates are currently entering, and the constant media attention paid to the failings of big business, it is of no surprise that interest in entrepreneurship is growing. In addition, some argue that limited opportunities of career advancement in the corporate world for minorities, particularly African Americans, has made entrepreneurship a more attractive, and viable alternative (Basu & Altinay, 2002; Sriram, Tigineh & Herron, 2007). While research has made significant strides in predicting what factors promote overall entrepreneurial success, less is currently known about why some individuals pursue entrepreneurial initiatives and some do not, and why some groups succeed at higher rates whereas others fail. According to Fairlie & Robb (2008) much is still unknown about why some racial groups are more successful in their entrepreneurial endeavors than others; our examination of the entrepreneurial attitudes of African American business students seeks to provide insight into this phenomenon.

The current economy is highly dependent on small business and entrepreneurship, and this very much includes the enterprises of African Americans. Estimates indicate that there exists approximately one million African American owned businesses in the U.S., which account for over \$100 billion in annual sales (African American Entrepreneurs, 2009). In addition, African Americans are 50% more likely than whites to start their own businesses, and 86% of African American teens polled by Junior Achievement expressed interest in starting a business (African American Entrepreneurs, 2009). According to another sample of African American teenagers, their interest in entrepreneurship stems from a desire to be more autonomous and to help others (Wilson, Marlino & Kickul, 2004). These statistics are highly consistent with our findings. The nascent minority entrepreneurs included in the current study were found to have significantly stronger entrepreneurial attitudes than the student entrepreneurs who were originally used to validate the Entrepreneurial Attitudes Orientation Scale.

Our findings with regard to the impact of prior exposure to entrepreneurial activities and its impact on attitudes are also consistent with what is known about real-life entrepreneurship. Other authors have indicated that intergenerational linkages in business ownership are quite strong; some studies indicate that being self employed is much more likely for the children of entrepreneurs (Fairlie & Robb, 2008). In fact, some estimate that more than one half of all business owners had a self-employed family member in their history (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Although not a primary focus of our study, it is important to note the value that entrepreneurship education can play in helping prepare African American students for success in the entrepreneurial world. Research shows that many young adults, particularly aged 25-34, are often interested in new venture creation, and individuals with post-secondary academic experience are more likely to act in an entrepreneurial manner (Minniti, Bygrave and Autio, 2006). This, combined with our results indicating that college-age African Americans already possess strong entrepreneurial attitudes, makes it critical for colleges and universities to offer entrepreneurship programs for young adults interested in business ownership. These programs can not only help them recognize entrepreneurship as a viable career choice, but also equip them with a better skill set for business development. Thompson (2004) suggests that talent and temperament are vital for entrepreneurs, and talent can be improved through participation in educational programs. If you can assess whether or not someone has the temperament to be an entrepreneur, then learning can be “relatively quick and easy” when appropriate training is provided (p. 246).

In general, our findings are likely to be good omens. If one accepts the premise that attitudes are precursors to intentions, and intentions predict behaviors; the current generation of African American business students is well suited to pursue and succeed in the entrepreneurial realm. They have not only the desire to pursue new business opportunities, but also possess the human capital that is gained through education and prior exposure to entrepreneurship that are necessary determinants of success in this field.

Future Research

Each and every one of us has a vested interest in promoting the success of small business enterprise in the U.S. Minority firms hire more than 4.7 million employees, a disproportionate share of them minorities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), and many of these jobs are located in disadvantaged communities. Given the fact that minority owned businesses do not have the same

profitability outcomes of white-owned enterprise, any and all efforts to understand this discrepancy should be undertaken. The current study indicates that one area which should not be an impediment to the current generation of nascent entrepreneurs is their attitudes toward business ownership. However, future research is necessary to identify other areas that might promote entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial success among the African American population. With a better understanding of this, and policy to promote it, the economic standing of all Americans is potentially improved and the small business sector's overall strength is solidified.

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