

Entrepreneurial impressions – reflection



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Introduction

In this course, we take a closer look at the entrepreneurial individual. During the course, you will be examining recent research evidence on entrepreneurial personality and behaviour, and comparing it with the views of practising entrepreneurs. Some people have strong views about the psychological and behavioural aspects of entrepreneurship and there are also many unresolved questions, for example:

- Is there such a thing as an entrepreneurial personality?
- How are entrepreneurs influenced by other people, such as friends and family?
- Can you learn to be an entrepreneur?

It is tempting to look for simple answers to these questions. However, the factors influencing entrepreneurial activity are really rather complex and the subject of continuing debate. As you begin to take a more detailed look at the evidence and arguments you may find it useful to relate them to your own experience.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [BB846 *Entrepreneurship: experience and perspective*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- consider what it means to be 'an entrepreneur'
- examine the role played by an entrepreneur's family and friends
- reflect on the narratives (or 'stories') that entrepreneurs create.

1 Entrepreneurship: first impressions

Though it is easy to find a basic definition of the words 'entrepreneur' and 'entrepreneurship', there is still a lot of disagreement over the way these words are used in practice. For example, while some people describe any small business owner as an entrepreneur, others reserve that term for a person who is either starting a new venture or running one that is highly innovative or capable of rapid growth. Similarly, while there is a common tendency to understand entrepreneurship largely in terms of exceptional individuals, it is also possible to emphasise the distinctive social relationships or networks that are associated with this kind of activity. This course encourages you to start thinking about entrepreneurship: what it is, how it works and why it is worth exploring.



Figure 1 People have a tendency to stereotype entrepreneurs

There is a widespread tendency to stereotype entrepreneurs and, as a consequence, to over-simplify a far more complex phenomenon. For example, some people see commercial entrepreneurs as a wholly positive force in society, while for others they evoke negative images. At the same time, the language of 'entrepreneurship' has been used to describe radically different types of human behaviour. The end result is that a team of social entrepreneurs building innovative healthcare systems and a criminal gang creating illicit trading networks may both find themselves referred to as acting 'entrepreneurially'. In the first activity, we start to explore this territory by asking what it means to be an 'entrepreneur'.

1.1 Activity 1

SuperJam – an entrepreneurial story

Allow about 90 minutes for this activity

Read Section 1.2 'Scoping and defining entrepreneurship' in [Exploring Entrepreneurship: Practices and Perspectives](#) (Blundel and Lockett, 2011, pp. 4–9) and make your own notes on the working definitions of 'entrepreneurs', 'entrepreneurial activity', 'entrepreneurship' and 'enterprise' that are offered in the text. Also spend a few minutes considering the different kinds of activity that might be described as entrepreneurial, based on the ways it is organised, the context in which it takes place and the goals that are pursued in its name.

Now watch 'A successful jam-making business' (duration: 05:53 minutes). It features 20-year-old Fraser Doherty from Edinburgh, who started making jam at home with his grandmother. As demand grew, he looked into the jam market and spotted a gap for a healthier brand which he successfully marketed to supermarket chains. His success with SuperJam has brought global media attention. Now he uses some of the profits to fund afternoon social events for local pensioners. Make your own notes in response to the following questions:

1. What do you see as distinctively entrepreneurial about Fraser as an individual?
2. What other factors do you see as significant in the success of his business?
3. Read Case 1.1 Helen Child: an entrepreneur looks back in [Exploring Entrepreneurship: Practices and Perspectives](#) (pp. 2–3). How does Fraser's entrepreneurial experience compare to that of Helen? List the main similarities and differences (you may also wish to include a comparison with your own direct or indirect experiences).

You might also like to carry out a quick search to get updates on Fraser's venture at [the SuperJam website](#).

Video content is not available in this format.

[A successful jam-making business](#)

Discussion

1. Based on the evidence of the video and blog, you may have noticed that Fraser Doherty has a number of personal attributes that appear to have been useful in developing his jam-making venture. For example, he is able to communicate his ideas in a very natural, clear and persuasive way, both in written form and on camera. Above all, he seems to have a great enthusiasm for his business, and for what it can do for other people. What do you see if you look beneath the informal and relaxed exterior? Did you detect signs that Fraser possesses personal characteristics such as single-mindedness, stamina and the capacity to cope with a degree of uncertainty? You may find it useful to compare your findings with those of other students, and with the textbook example identified in question 3.
2. Looking beyond Fraser as an individual, it is possible to identify a number of what might be termed 'social' and 'economic' factors that have had a positive influence on the SuperJam venture. For example, Fraser's family has provided a supportive

environment in which he has been able to experiment with the business. Did you find any influential role models in Fraser's own account of his entrepreneurial career? Turning to economic factors, we can see the SuperJam concept as part of a broader retail trend in the United Kingdom and other countries towards more differentiated premium food products.

3. How did the stories of these entrepreneurs compare? Did you notice any similarities, either at the individual level, or in terms of external factors (for example social or economic trends) that have helped shape their entrepreneurial careers? When you examine the lives of entrepreneurs, it is useful to look for such patterns and also to consider the ways in which they differ. It is also important to think about the person who is telling the 'story' and what impact this might have on your own understanding. Narratives are among the most powerful forms of **persuasive communication**. For this reason, they can become a very valuable resource for entrepreneurs. For example, they can be used to help legitimise a new business idea and to obtain support from potential financiers, business partners and other influential people. This is clearly evident in Fraser's case, where the story of the 'Jam Boy' is a central theme in the organisation's communications.

Fraser Doherty's story might be seen as reinforcing another stereotype of the entrepreneur as an exceptional individual. However the case also contains evidence of external factors that helped him create a successful business venture at such an early age. In the next activity, we examine the influence exerted by other people, including family and friends.

1.2 Activity 2

Key influences – family and friends

Allow about 120 minutes for this activity

No man is an island

Entire of itself;

Every man is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main ...

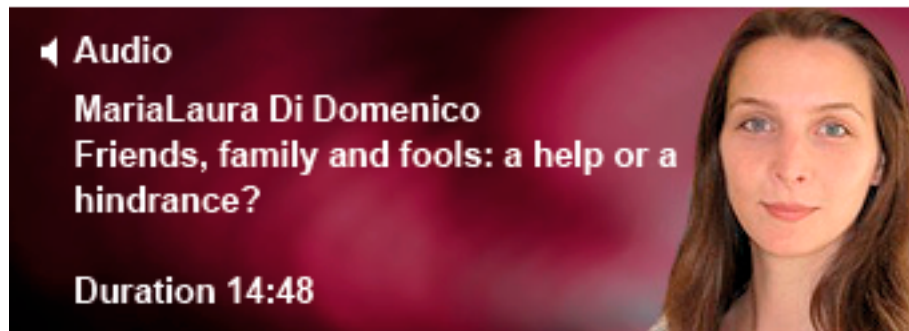
John Donne, *For whom the bell tolls* (1624)

One of the persistent myths of entrepreneurship is of the lonely hero taking on the rest of the world. Though a few prominent entrepreneurs might appear to fit this mould, the reality is rather different. People often turn to those around them, including immediate family and trusted friends, for help and support – particularly in the early days of a new business venture. We have already seen an example of this in Fraser Doherty's venture, 'SuperJam', which was inspired by his grandmother's enthusiasm for making jam, and established with the enthusiastic support of his parents (Activity 1).

Entrepreneurs use their informal networks to obtain a rich variety of resources. These

include tangible resources, such as start-up capital and a place to store stock or equipment, and intangible resources, such as personal encouragement and advice. For example, the inexperienced owners of a new venture might gain much-needed credibility by recruiting a friend or relative with useful experience and a trustworthy reputation. We have been using the term 'resource', which suggests that networks always have a positive impact on a venture. But is there a downside to such relationships?

1. Listen to 'Friends, family and fools: a help or a hindrance?' by [MariaLaura Di Domenico](#) and note how the interviewees describe their experiences.



Audio content is not available in this format.

[Friends, family and fools: a help or a hindrance?](#)

2. Make some notes addressing the following questions

- What do you see as the potential benefits of relying on family and friends?
- What kind of influence can family and friends exert on a new venture?
- What do you see as the main challenges that might arise?

3. Spend a few minutes thinking about your own informal networks, and imagine how you might draw upon those relationships to help in establishing a new entrepreneurial venture. Begin with your immediate contacts (friends, family and colleagues) and then try to identify any important indirect contacts that you might have through these individuals (for example your friend's brother, partner or employer). How might you make use of these connections, and what issues do you see arising?

Discussion

Family businesses raise some interesting questions about the entrepreneurial personality and how it is formed. There are many examples suggesting that entrepreneurial careers are often prompted by the example of older relatives and that many of the key decisions in a growing venture are influenced, either directly or indirectly, by family and friends. Members of a person's informal network can be a source of great support, particularly in the early years of a new business. However, as indicated in 'Friends, family and fools: a help or a hindrance?' they can also create serious challenges such as internal rivalries, conflicts of interest and other tensions. These issues need to be sensitively managed if you want the venture and the personal relationships to survive. There are also important ethical issues to consider. These become clearer if you consider the position of the other people involved – the elderly aunt who is persuaded to provide funding out of her retirement savings, or the friend who agrees to give up a well-paid job in return for the promise of a stake in the new

venture. It is worth considering how entrepreneurs might do harm as they 'exploit' their networks, and how these negative outcomes might be avoided.

For the final part of this activity, you were asked to think about your own informal network. In practice, our personal networks change over time, with new connections being made and strengthened, while others are lost or weakened. You may find it useful to reflect on these changes, both in your own network and in those described in the accounts of the many entrepreneurs that we will encounter during the course. Much of this change is due to changing circumstances (e.g. moving house, starting a new job, enrolling on a course), but it is also evident that some people are particularly adept at manipulating their networks in order to pursue their entrepreneurial aims.

In the final activity we return to the questions 'What does it mean to act entrepreneurially and to be an entrepreneur?' 'How are entrepreneurs perceived by other people?' and 'How do they represent themselves?'

1.3 Activity 3

Entrepreneurial impressions and stories

Allow about 120 minutes for this activity

The life experiences of an entrepreneur can often provide the basis of a good story. These narratives can be interesting, informative and compelling, they may contain elements of drama, personal tragedy and, as in the following example, humour. But what do these stories actually tell us about entrepreneurship?

1. Read 'An early entrepreneurial experience?' a short account by Fraser Doherty (founder of 'SuperJam') describing an early childhood experience of visiting a chicken farm. As you read, make notes addressing the following questions:

- Which aspects of the story do you see as distinctively 'entrepreneurial'?
- What practical lessons might you draw from this account?
- What does the story tell you about this entrepreneur in particular?

You may find it useful to take a brief look back at [Activity 1](#), which charts the growth of Doherty's 'SuperJam' business, and at the other activities in this course, which have examined some different aspects of entrepreneurship.

2. Talk to a colleague, friend or family member who has an entrepreneurial background; ask them if they are willing to share a similar short anecdote or to describe a memorable event that illustrates their life as an entrepreneur. Alternatively, locate a short anecdote in an entrepreneurial autobiography or a short autobiographical article (articles should be easily located online as many prominent entrepreneurs make this kind of material freely available on their personal websites).

3. Write a short summary of the anecdote and analyse it using the same three questions that you applied to the Fraser Doherty story and compare the answers.

An early entrepreneurial experience?

I started my entrepreneurial journey very young, although some people start even younger than I did. In a lot of ways, starting at such a young age has an advantage: the naivety of youth makes any dream possible! When I was about ten, I visited a chicken farm and was fascinated by the business of collecting eggs from the hens. I asked the farmer if I could have a box of eggs, so that I could hatch them into chickens of my own, and sell the eggs. The farmer gave me half a dozen eggs and laughed, saying that there was no way I could hatch them into chickens. She joked that I'd have to sit on them for three weeks.

When I told my parents about the idea, they weren't too pleased at the prospect of having chickens running around, as you can imagine, but they said that I could give it a go. I suppose they doubted that I would manage to hatch out the eggs. I then had to figure out how I was going to keep a box of eggs warm around the clock for about three weeks. I thought about using lots of hot water bottles, putting the eggs in the oven on a really low temperature or maybe leaving them in the greenhouse. Obviously, none of these ideas was going to work. Eventually, I had the idea of keeping the eggs on top of the cable TV box under the television. It was quite warm there if the telly was left on all the time.

I waited anxiously for weeks, checking every day that the eggs were OK. Finally, one morning, everyone was sitting eating breakfast and we could hear a little chirping coming from under the television. The fluffy yellow chick had hatched out of its egg. I named her Henrietta, which, being ten years old, I believed to be quite a witty name for a hen. Later in the day, another two of the chicks hatched and so I had to start thinking about what I was actually going to do about them.

(Doherty, 2011, pp. 9–10)

Discussion

This activity should help you to reflect on some of the issues that have covered during this course. For example, is there evidence here of distinctively entrepreneurial mindsets or behaviours? In addition, you might consider whether there is evidence here of external influences, and of how these might have helped to either encourage or challenge the entrepreneur (Activity 2). You might also refer back to Activity 1 in order to put Fraser Doherty's story into context, and to see how this early experience might have influenced his subsequent entrepreneurial career.

If you have been able to make contact with an entrepreneurial individual, it could be interesting to have a broader discussion about the issues we have covered in this course. For example: What is their perspective on the search for an entrepreneurial personality? Where (and how) did they develop their entrepreneurial abilities? How much importance do they attach to informal networks? Given the high profile of entrepreneurs you might also talk to people who do not have an entrepreneurial background, to get some different points of view.

Conclusion

During this course, you have been encouraged to examine some important ideas about entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, and perhaps to challenge some of your own preconceptions. You looked at how one entrepreneurial individual went about creating a successful business venture at an early age, and how other entrepreneurs have made use of informal ties with family and friends. In doing so, you also considered the mixture of personal and social influences on entrepreneurial activity.

It may be useful at this stage to review some of the issues we have covered in this course. This brief summary should help you to recall some of the main points:

- Researchers have examined entrepreneurship at the level of the individual, and have attempted to uncover its psychological and behavioural dimensions. This work has raised a number of questions regarding our understanding of entrepreneurship and what it means to be entrepreneurial.
- Entrepreneurial individuals are influenced by people around them. These informal networks play a variety of roles. For example, friends and family members may be approached in order to obtain much-needed finance, skills, knowledge, labour and other resources. Entrepreneurs need to consider the potential advantages and disadvantages when forming such relationships. People often find out about entrepreneurs through biographical or autobiographical accounts. These 'stories' or narratives offer valuable insights for those studying entrepreneurship, but it is always important to consider who is telling the story, and what their purpose might be. Entrepreneurs can also make effective use of stories to promote their ventures.

We hope that you found this course interesting and that it has encouraged you to continue studying entrepreneurship in its many different forms.

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Glossary

Persuasive communication

Persuasive communication involves the use of words and a variety of non-verbal signals (e.g., body language, gestures, tone of voice, images) in order to influence the views, perceptions and behaviours of other people.

Serial entrepreneur

A person who is responsible for creating and growing a succession of different commercial or social ventures over an extended period.

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Text

Blundel, R and Lockett, N (2011) Section 1.2 'Scoping and defining entrepreneurship' from *Exploring entrepreneurship*, Oxford University Press. www.oup.com

Video clips

Extracts from the BBC programme Food Stuff: Seasonality, Jam & Export, tx: 27.11.09.
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