

INVESTGATING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDES OF ARMENIAN IMMIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the degree to which first-generation Armenian immigrants residing in the U.S. possessed entrepreneurial attitudes as measured by the Entrepreneurial Attitudes Orientation (EAO) scale. Findings indicated that this group possessed very entrepreneurial like attitudes, with scores on three of the four EAO scales being significantly stronger than the EAO's validation sample's scores. Additional analyses indicated that there were no significant differences in attitudinal strength for males versus females; however, having worked for a small business in the past was associated with significantly stronger entrepreneurial attitudes on three of the four attitudinal scales.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has long been lauded for its entrepreneurial spirit. In high-income countries such as the U.S., entrepreneurial ventures play a critical role in the national economy by promoting growth and innovation. In contrast, many developing nations are still in the process of establishing the fundamental infrastructure necessary for entrepreneurial development. While entrepreneurs in high-income countries are often focused on identifying new opportunities, those in developing nations are may frequently act out of necessity due to unstable market conditions (Minniti, Allen & Langowitz, 2006).

One such country in the midst of an economic transformation is Armenia. Since its independence in 1991 from the former Soviet Union, Armenia has struggled to create a stable economic and political system capable of promoting entrepreneurship. Like many developing nations, Armenia has been hindered by limited financial resources, restrictive tax policies, unfair competitive practices, and widespread corruption (Bitzenis & Nito, 2005). Interestingly, however, research has shown that young adults in Armenia are still optimistic about economic opportunities and confident in their abilities (Roberts, 2006). This is due in part to an expansion of the education system, particularly access to higher education. Despite the optimism in Armenia and many other developing nations, the best and brightest are often attracted to high-income nations due to the business opportunities available in a mature free market system. The U.S., in particular, has long been a destination for the most talented innovators from other countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-Income versus Middle to Low-Income Countries

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) has produced many reports on the entrepreneurial activities in the global economy. With this research GEM had classified countries as either high-income or middle to low-income, based on various economic and political variables. A scan of GEM research produces some very interesting findings in regards to entrepreneurship. Not surprisingly, high-income countries like the U.S. have a more developed entrepreneurial infrastructure and less resource constraints. Often, entrepreneurial firms in high-income countries are innovative and able to take advantage of market opportunities (Minniti, Allen & Langowitz, 2006).

Conversely, middle and low-income countries, like Armenia, have a less developed infrastructure and are much less opportunity driven. Rather, findings show that many turn to entrepreneurship out of necessity due to the limited employment prospects. However, it is important to note that the level of early stage entrepreneurial activity is often higher in these middle and low-income nations (Bosma & Harding, 2006). Perhaps the same level of necessity that drives people to entrepreneurship also empowers them to take action to actually start a new venture, no matter the number of obstacles. If this is the case then their drive for success supersedes their fear of failure.

Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Research has shown that immigrants do not often enter mainstream commercial markets, but rather specific niches, often based on location-specific ethnic networks (Waldinger, Aldrich, Ward & Associates, 1990; Razin, 2002). The nature and degree of the entrepreneurial behavior is determined by a combination of group characteristics and available opportunities in concentrated market segments. Rusinovic (2008) found that immigrant entrepreneurs are often attracted to four specific types of markets, including ethnic markets, middleman markets, niche markets, and mainstream markets. Interestingly, mainstream opportunities have generally been more accessible to second generation immigrant entrepreneurs. According to Singh and DeNoble (2004), immigrant entrepreneurs are primarily found in specialty areas such as underserved markets with little competition from larger businesses, sectors that require low economies of scale, highly segmented markets, and exotic foods market. More specifically, Rath and Kloosterman (2000) found that 60% of all immigrant entrepreneurs work in the wholesale, retail and restaurant sectors.

These business choices, as suggested by Singh and DeNoble (2004), can be attributed to the cultural predispositions and limited structural opportunities available for ethnic entrepreneurs. This may be due to their lack of resources and professional networks in the host country, or a personal desire to stay connected with their own cultural heritage and the comfort of their own ethnic community, particularly available in large urban areas. Rath and Kloosterman (2000) argue that immigrant entrepreneurs are attracted to industry sectors with low entry barriers and little resource requirements, particularly in regards to capital and sophisticated skills.

And while their professional networks may lack, these entrepreneurs do use their own ethnic social networks, especially family members, in an attempt to cut costs and increase flexibility.

Nevertheless, entrepreneurship can provide immigrants with access to work and income potential that is often lacking in the traditional labor market (Rath & Kloosterman, 2000). This not only provides opportunity, but also helps limit the persistently high unemployment rate generally associate with immigrants. These entrepreneurs can provide an important economic presence in their communities, which makes it important to learn more about the entrepreneurial temperament and talents of diverse populations. Rath and Kloosterman (2000) have encouraged a greater focus on the activities of immigrant entrepreneurs in order to gain a more complete understanding of their importance in the national economy. Recent research out of Duke University concluded that “What is clear is that immigrants have become a significant driving force in the creation of new businesses and intellectual property in the U.S. — and that their contributions have increased over the past decade (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, and Gereffi, 2007, p. 5).

Background on Armenia

Before independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia’s economy was based largely on industry and was highly dependent on outside resources. Armenia’s economy successfully recovered from a sharp decline in early 1990s as a result of successful implementation of economic reforms, slashing inflation, stabilizing currency, and prioritizing small and medium-sized enterprises (Armenian Review, 2008). This created an environment that is much more supportive of entrepreneurship and has enabled many people previously constrained by Communist rule to amass new wealth. The new generation of young adults, in particular, is energized by the emergence of new business opportunities coupled with a strong belief in their own ability to succeed (Roberts, 2006). This is consistent with the findings from various GEM reports that indicate young adults aged 25-34 are one of the most important subgroups of entrepreneurs in many countries (Minniti, Allen & Langowitz, 2006).

Emigration from Armenia has been rampant in recent decades, with the result being one of the most rapid population losses in the world. Some 800,000 Armenians left the country in the 1990s, almost a quarter of the population. Census estimates for 2001 indicate that 1.5 million Armenians emigrated to other countries. Consistent with this movement, the number of newborns in Armenia fell from 90,000 in 1990 to 36,000 a decade later (Armenia Review, 2008). Although they have left their home nation seeking new opportunities, these emigrants are infusing large amounts of capital back into Armenia, thus helping spur growth in consumer demand and job creation, which has helped to improve the national infrastructure. More specifically, remittances from abroad, predominantly provided by those who had immigrated within the past 15 years, comprised 17.4% of all Armenian income in 2001 (according to the results of the Integrated Living Conditions Surveys performed by the National Statistical Service in Armenia in 1998/99 and 2001, as cited by Yeghiazaryan, Avanesian, and Shahnazaryan, 2003, p. 9). The GDP growth rate for Armenia in 2006 and 2007 was 13.3% and 13.7% respectively (Armenia Review, 2008).

As with most recent immigrants to the U.S., many Armenians have chosen to live in neighborhoods composed of those who share similar cultural and national identities. The current study examines the entrepreneurial attitudes of one such enclave – a group of Armenian immigrants living in California. Immigrants often bring many economic benefits into a country, as well as distinct qualities of their own culture. In regards to entrepreneurship, a unique aspect of this study will be the transition of a population from a developing economy into a high-income nation.

The Attitude – Behavior Link

The theory of planned behavior argues that attitudes are precursors to intentions, which are antecedent to behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). More specifically, attitudes have a behavioral component that consists of behavioral intentions and predispositions to act in a particular way toward some subject. Research has shown that intentions play an important role in understanding the entrepreneurial process (Shapero & Sokol 1982; Krueger, 1993; Krueger & Brazeal, 1994).

Specifically, Shapero and Sokol (1982) found that attitudes are linked with entrepreneurial intentions in perceived feasibility and desirability, which is often based on prior exposure to entrepreneurial activities. Later research by Krueger (1993) and Krueger and Brazeal (1994) supported Shapero's propositions about entrepreneurial intentions. Krueger (1993) found that prior entrepreneurial exposure impacted intentions through perceived feasibility and past experiences influenced perceived desirability to start a new venture. The entrepreneurial intentions framework developed by Krueger and Brazeal (1994) proposed that entrepreneurial characteristics could be learned and generally vary based on personal characteristics and experiences. This is supported by more recent research (Mitra & Matlay, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Florin, Karri & Rossiter, 2007) that suggests that an entrepreneurial skills set and temperament can be influenced by entrepreneurial experiences and educational programs.

Prior research on entrepreneurship examined various attitude constructs and has linked high achievement (McClelland, 1961), internal locus of control (Brockhaus, 1982; Gasse, 1985), self-efficacy (Krueger & Brazeal, 1994; Frazier & Niehm, 2006), creativity (Zampetakis & Moustakis, 2006), innovation (Rauch & Frese, 2007) and improvisation (Hmieleski & Corbett, 2006) to entrepreneurship and business creation. In addition, research suggests that entrepreneurs have a high level of self-esteem and confidence (Robinson, 1987) and a more positive attitude toward risk and independence (Douglas & Shepherd, 2002). Although entrepreneurs tend to be more confident in their abilities, some studies have shown that self-confidence and motivation can be affected by experience and past business failures (Gatewood & Shaver, 1991; Busenitz, 1999), and individuals receiving positive feedback about their entrepreneurial abilities often have higher entrepreneurial expectations (Gatewood, Shaver, Powers & Gartner, 2002).

CURRENT STUDY

While high-income countries are known for more advanced economic policies and business infrastructure, middle and low-income countries like Armenia are still in the process of developing the fundamental attributes necessary for business creation. As of 2005, immigrant founded companies produced \$52 billion in sales and employed approximately 450,000 people in the U.S. (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, and Gereffi, 2007, p. 4). Thus, research that explores the factors that help determine the entrepreneurial capacity of Armenians that have immigrated to the U.S. is of interest. While the current study is exploratory in nature, research on entrepreneurship among immigrants and young adults leads us to anticipate that Armenian immigrants will possess attitudes which are entrepreneurial in orientation. For example, research has shown that early stage entrepreneurship is often more prevalent in middle and low-income nations (Bosma & Harding, 2006). In addition, Minniti, Bygrave, and Autio (2005) found that many young adults, particularly those aged 25-34, are highly interested in new venture creation, and when exposed to experiences that develop their business acumen, are more likely to act in an entrepreneurial manner.

Research has also established a link between entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions and past business experience and exposure. This may include direct experience in starting a business or indirect experience through a family business. Past studies have shown that both work experience with a small business (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003) and with a family business (Reitan, 1997) can have a positive impact on perceptions of new venture creation. Entrepreneurial attitudes and temperament can change (Robinson, Stimpson, Huefner & Hunt, 1991; Thompson, 2004), and prior work experience or other forms of exposure may play a significant role in shaping these attitudes. As such, it is expected that past entrepreneurial exposure, or lack thereof, will also be related to the entrepreneurial attitudes of Armenian immigrants.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 107 Armenian immigrants to the Los Angeles area who volunteered to respond to a paper and pencil survey. Potential respondents were identified by one of the authors in his interactions with the local immigrant community. Although respondents represent a convenience sample, as an exploratory study aimed at examining a relatively small, frequently localized population, a convenience sample is not an inappropriate precursor to future research. Respondents ranged in age from 18-45 years old, with an average age of 21 years. Approximately 72% of respondents were female, and over 80% of respondents were born outside of the U.S. The majority of respondents were employed (62.6%), with 32.7% being full-time employees and 29.9% working part-time. In regards to time spent in the U.S., 55.6% had lived in the U.S. for over 19 years, 10.2% for 15-18 years, 8% for 10-14 years and 26.2% have less than ten years of residency in the U.S.

In regards to previous entrepreneurial experience, while only 21.6% of the respondents previously owned a small business, 52.3% indicated that someone in their family had owned a small business. Approximately 50% had previous entrepreneurial exposure from having worked in small business establishments.

Measures

We measured entrepreneurial attitudes with the Entrepreneurial Attitudes Orientation (EAO) 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 EAO version utilized was comprised of 21 items, each rated on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The four subscales have been shown to produce 77% accuracy in predicting entrepreneurship (Robinson et al., 1991, p. 22).

The EAO was designed specifically to measure and compare entrepreneurial attitudes and has been featured in studies with entrepreneurs in multiple countries. Prior studies have used the EAO to measure entrepreneurial attitudes in China (Gibson, Harris & Barber, 2009; Harris & Gibson, 2008), Brazil (Gibson, Harris & Barber, 2009), South Africa (Boshoff & VanWyk, 2004), India (Shetty, 2004) and Russia (Robinson, et al., 2001). In addition, Lindsay (2005) used the EAO to develop a cultural model of entrepreneurial attitudes specifically for indigenous entrepreneurs.

In addition to completing the EAO survey, respondents answered two other sets of questions. In order to measure exposure to entrepreneurial initiatives, three questions were asked related to this: 1) Have you ever owned your own small business? 2) Have you ever worked for a small business? 3) Has your family ever owned a small business? Finally, participants provided demographic information including age, gender, employment status, place of birth, and length of time lived in the U.S.

Analyses

In order to assess the degree to which the sample population possessed scores that were "entrepreneur like" on the attitudes of interest, t-tests were performed to compare the sample mean to the mean entrepreneur scores developed as part of the EAO validation. Secondary analyses utilized ANOVA to examine whether or not the entrepreneurial attitudes found among the Armenian sample population were significantly different based upon gender or previous exposure to entrepreneurial activities.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Consistent with our expectations, the study participants were found to have very “entrepreneur-like” attitudes when compared with the actual entrepreneurs that formed the validation sample for the EAO. In fact, on all but one attitude, the sample population’s attitudinal scores were significantly higher than were the validation sample; perceived self-esteem was the only variable where the scores of the Armenian sample were not significantly higher – but they also were not significantly different (meaning lower than) and were therefore still entrepreneurial-like. Table 1 summarizes the findings and provides descriptive statistics for the variables of interest.

While only suppositional, our findings are consistent with studies that documented the role of immigrants in the U.S. economy, particularly in cosmopolitan locations with large ethnic networks. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, immigrant entrepreneurs are the fastest-growing segment of small business owners today. Immigrants form small businesses at a much higher rate than do non-immigrant Americans; even in the midst of an economic downturn, the rate of new venture creation among immigrants outpaced that of non-immigrants in the U.S. (Fairlie, 2009). In addition, immigrants have played a key role in entrepreneurship within the technology industry; an immigrant was a key founder in approximately 25.3% of all engineering and technology companies established in the U.S. between 1995 and 2005 (Wadhwa, Saxenian, Rissing, and Gereffi, 2007, p. 4). According to Cornwall (2006, web log): “The last great entrepreneurial economic boom was created in large part by first generation Americans and sustained by a large, but controlled, wave of immigration that helped to build an economy that last through most of the 1900s.”

An examination of potential differences in entrepreneurial attitudes between men and women in the current sample found no significant differences; their scores were comparable. This result is consistent with a study of U.S. college students who took the EAO (Harris, Gibson, & Mick, 2009) and the growth of women in entrepreneurship. Given that as of 2008, 8,059,635 firms were projected to be owned by women (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2009, p. 9), this similarity is not shocking. As a matter of fact, between 1997 and 2002, business ownership among women grew at twice the rate of all other groups (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2009, p. 1).

Table 1. Summary of Survey Results

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ACHIEVEMENT ATTITUDES**	IN BUSINESS	107	4.52	10.00	7.89	1.25
Men		30	5.70	9.87	8.04	1.09
Women		77	4.52	10.00	7.83	1.31
Worked for a small business*		53	4.70	10.00	8.23	1.07
INNOVATION ATTITUDES**	IN BUSINESS	107	4.96	10.00	7.59	1.18
Men		30	5.58	9.92	7.82	1.03
Women		77	4.96	10.00	7.51	1.22
Worked for a small business*		53	4.96	10.00	8.23	1.07
PERCEIVED PERSONAL CONTROL OF BUSINESS OUTCOMES ATTITUDES**		107	4.75	10.00	7.45	1.25
Men		30	5.25	10.00	7.53	1.28
Women		77	4.75	10.00	7.41	1.24
Worked for a small business*		53	4.75	10.00	7.67	1.23
PERCEIVED SELF-ESTEEM IN BUSINESS ATTITUDES		107	4.00	10.00	6.93	1.41
Men		30	4.71	9.57	6.85	1.40
Women		77	4.00	10.00	6.97	1.43
Worked for a small business		53	4.36	10.00	7.04	1.36

*those that worked for a small business had significantly stronger attitudes than those who had not ($p < .05$ level). **Sample population had scale scores that were significantly stronger than the entrepreneur validation sample for the EAO ($p < .05$ level).

As expected, having worked for a small business in the past positively impacted the sample populations' entrepreneurial attitudes. Only perceived self-esteem was not significantly different for those who had worked in a small business. For all three other attitudes, having worked for a small business resulted in significantly higher attitudinal scores. These findings support previous research on the importance of entrepreneurial exposure to future perceptions of venture creation (Gatewood & Shaver, 1991; Reitan, 1996; Peterman & Kennedy, 2003), and shows a consistency between American and immigrant entrepreneurs in regards to the importance of past experiences. Despite the impact of having worked for a small business, no differences were found when considering past exposure to entrepreneurial activities operationalized as having a family business or one's own small business.

Immigrant entrepreneurship will continue to rise in importance with the continued influx of people searching for new opportunities. Whether the result of labor limitations (Feagin & Imani, 1994; Singh & DeNoble, 2004), or structural opportunities available in the host country

(Hiebert, 2002), ethnic entrepreneurs can make a positive contribution to both the local and national economy. One key is for these individuals to gain exposure and become embedded in the local marketplace. As indicated by Hiebert (2002), prospective immigrant entrepreneurs are only able to establish new ventures in business sectors they know about and have established a level of knowledge and comfort.

Often these individuals serve an important role in specialized markets by providing goods and services that may not otherwise be offered. In addition, research indicates that second generation immigrant entrepreneurs have a greater ability to move more into mainstream business sectors (Rusinovic, 2008). This includes a move away from segmented markets that primarily serve fellow immigrants into businesses with a broad reach outside their own ethnic boundaries. Greater involvement in these expanded sectors generally allows for more positive growth opportunities and better long term success (Rusinovic, 2008).

As suggested by Morawska (2004), immigrants often follow different paths of cultural adaptation, but they frequent have the same goal of economic success (Rath & Kloosterman, 2000). Indeed, there are two reasons typically cited for individuals engaging in entrepreneurial activities - opportunity recognition and the lack of viable economic alternatives. As with other minorities, immigrants may feel that they are less accepted within traditional organizations, perceive less job and task discretion, and have lower career satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Thus, these individuals often pursue new venture development as the most viable alternative for gainful employment and economic accomplishment (Weiler & Bernsek, 2001; Heilman & Chen 2003). Although involvement in entrepreneurial activities can help with the assimilation process, it may not always lead to complete integration into a host society. However, diverse cities, like Los Angeles, are better able to foster immigrant entrepreneurship as a means of economic integration. When the assimilation occurs, it not only serves the interests of entrepreneurs, but also adds to the global character of the host location. This type of multi-ethnic environment can encourage transnational business activities that combine cultural assimilation with entrepreneurship (Morawska, 2004).

FUTURE RESEARCH

As with other studies which examine entrepreneurial attitudes, the current paper acts as a new piece of the puzzle which provides greater degrees of insight into the entrepreneurial machine. It is also an early, first attempt by the researchers to examine what, if any, differences exist among new immigrant populations and those who have been in the U.S. for several generations. According to Fairlie (2009), immigrants are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship as a means to side-step the traditional barriers of entry to the workplace; it may be easier to start a business than to find a job. During 2008, the entrepreneurial activity rate increased sharply for immigrants, further widening the gap between immigrant and native-born new enterprises (Fairlie, 2009, p. 11). Given these statistics, the strong entrepreneurial attitudes evidenced in the current sample are indicative of this potentiality. Similarly, given the impact of small businesses on the economy, it is highly encouraging to see so many first generation Armenians residing in this country and embracing our system of free enterprise. If their attitudes are ultimately translated into entrepreneurial behaviors, they will promote the economic health of our nation.

The current study is not without constraints, which ideally, will be addressed with future research. For example, this study utilized a limited convenience sample obtained from only one geographic region. As with many immigrant groups to the U.S., the Armenian population has tended to settle in immigrant neighborhoods where access to advice about jobs, housing, and learning the English language is readily available. California hosts the largest Armenian population in the U.S. and Los Angeles is the city with the greatest concentration of Armenian immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This location provides not only a region of cultural familiarity for the group of interest, but also a venue to purposive sampling in future research endeavors. In addition, the current sample was disproportionately female. However, with a more rigorous sampling methodology, more confidence can be had when extrapolating findings to all Armenian immigrants.

Secondly, the cultural relativism of the EAO cannot be assured at this time. The instrument was developed and normed using a U.S. sample population. The attitudes which it measures may not manifest themselves in the same manner within a highly collectivist nation that does not yet have a strong history of entrepreneurship.

As this entrepreneurial spirit continues to grow throughout the world, an understanding of those factors that promote it is necessary. An examination of first generation immigrants' attitudes toward entrepreneurship is just one part of this equation that will lead to the development of a more complete global profile of entrepreneurs.

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