

Resilience in sudden changes and crises related to micro-entrepreneurship

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Abstract

The paper examines micro-entrepreneurs' resilience to significant changes in a company. The focus of this research is on uncovering the kinds of changes and crises entrepreneurs met and on how to classify these changes and crises? The unexpected changes that entrepreneurs may face can have a significant impact on both their current and future activities and can be directed either at the individual or the business level. In micro-entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs typically have to address changes and crises alone. To a micro-entrepreneur, a sudden change can be challenging because he/she does not necessarily have a support network to provide useful or sufficient help (Alonso et al., 2015). Managing such situations requires resilience and flexibility from entrepreneurs and companies alike. This empirical research was qualitative by nature and the research method was a retrospective multiple case study. The data collection method was based on semi-structured thematic interviews with 12 entrepreneurs and managers from the social and health care sector in Northern Finland. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed by content analysis with an interpretative approach, each on a case-by-case basis. The data were processed using qualitative data analysis software. Preliminary results suggested that the challenges that micro-entrepreneurs considered the most serious related to internal and external interventions, such as problems with staff, management, management models, authorities, institutions and bureaucracy. In addition, emotional interventions like one's own wellbeing and a lack of guidance and support related to real crises is a reality of a micro-entrepreneur's life.

Keywords: micro-entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, resilience, change, case study, Finland

1. Introduction

According to the European Union (EU) definition, a micro-enterprise is as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and has annual turnover and/or an annual balance sheet total that does not exceed 2 million euros (European Commission, 2003). Micro-enterprises represent more than 95% of European enterprises (Muller et al., 2016) and are considered a driver of the EU economy. There is a lack of academic research on micro-enterprises (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009), and thus a considerable gap in the literature regarding the reality of running a micro-business (Samujh, 2011).

In Finland, nearly 95% of companies are micro-enterprises (Statistics Finland, 2018). It is widely acknowledged that micro-enterprises experience resource scarcity, which forces them to operate under financial and expertise constraints (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). Micro-enterprises are largely influenced by their owner-managers (Burns, 2010), who play a pivotal role in an organisation's focus and success (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Burns, 2010), which often makes micro-enterprise culture an extension of the owner's personality. In general, when a micro-entrepreneur faces unexpected changes or crises, he/she has to resolve them alone. Even though it plays a significant role in entrepreneurship, this phenomenon is little-studied. Studies by Bruderl et al. (1992), which take as a theoretical framework the fields of organizational ecology and human capital theory, suggest that human capital may be a company's most important resource, because it affects both performance and development. Further, Ayala and Manzano (2010) argue that an entrepreneur's resilience—the tool they use survive crises—is one of the key factors to entrepreneurial success. Thus, resilience—the human system's ability to cope with significant change and survive—can be considered a meta-competence (Cheetham and Chivers, 1998). A resilient system is able to adapt to changing conditions and to develop new ways to succeed.

In psychology, resilience is defined as an individual's ability to tolerate difficult conditions and stressors without experiencing psychological distress. Severe conditions cause emotional reactions; but a resilient individual has a kind of mental elasticity and the capability to transform situations, which allows him or her to successfully negotiate stress. Bernard and Barbosa (2016, p. 89) have stated that "entrepreneurial resilience is as a form of emotional and cognitive ability that is useful for the entrepreneur, particularly when

bouncing back after failures connected to their entrepreneurial initiative.” At an individual level, resilience is seen as a function of personal ability in the face of crisis and as an ability to adapt to new situations (Sawalha, 2015). Thus, resilience is individual’s invisible meta-competence, which is a driver for behaviour and entrepreneurial intention and an underlying factor in various situations. According to Coutu (2002), the characteristics of the resilient individual are an ability to accept reality, a belief in there being a meaning to existence and improvisation skills. Therefore, the identification and development of resilience is necessary for an entrepreneur to maintain their business and keep it within their control, and to ensure its independence and ability to cope with crises. All of these definitions are consistent with the studies that find micro-enterprises to be flexible, agile and adaptable actors. This study seeks to find out whether an entrepreneur’s resilience is related to these characteristics attributed to micro-enterprises. In order to study micro-entrepreneurs’ experiences and resilience related to significant company changes or crises, this research posed two primary questions: What kind of unexpected event, change or crisis occurred in our case companies? (RQ1); and how can these unexpected events, changes or crises be categorised? (RQ2).

The empirical case study was qualitative by nature and was conducted in social and health care micro-companies in Northern Finland. The data collection method was based on semi-structured thematic interviews with 12 entrepreneurs and managers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed using an interpretative approach and the analysis method was a content analysis. The transcriptions were analysed case by case. The data were processed using NVivo 11 data analysis software.

This research provides perspectives on what kind of situations or enterprise crises micro-entrepreneurs may have to experience and how the possible phenomena can be categorized? The results of the qualitative case study include the micro-entrepreneurs’ descriptions of unexpected events related to their business, as well as the ways in which these events or crises might be categorized by using the framework of Conner (1993) and Hoopes & Mark (2004).

The paper first presents a theoretical discussion of the concept of resilience in general and how it relates to entrepreneurs’ businesses. It then presents the empirical approach of this study, including how the study was structured and the reference framework for methods and findings. Finally, it includes a discussion related to the study’s findings and implications.

2. Theoretical framework

Over the past 10 years, resilience has become a fashionable concept in business, used to explain adaptability in the face of sudden changes or crises. As a theoretical concept, resilience can be located in two quite different scientific traditions: psychology and ecological systems theory. In psychology, resilience can be defined based on an individual’s ability to cope with trauma and as well as on factors affecting traumatic survival (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno and Mancini, 2008). Resilience in ecological systems theory refers to the nonlinear recovery and adaptive dynamics of ecosystems. In ecology, resilience is generally defined as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances and to reorganize in the midst of changes, allowing the system to maintain its function, structure and identity (Folke, 2006; Zolli and Healy, 2012).

Resilience is often talked about in conjunction with flexibility, agility and elasticity in work context. Because of the nestedness of systems, the resilience of an entire ecosystem depends on the agility and adaptability of its smaller parts. Mutually dependent and free systems are the most flexible and most capable of transformation, provided they are local and multifaceted. This reflects the central role that biodiversity plays in creating resilience and self-adaptability (Folke, 2006; Zolli and Healy, 2011). In psychology, resilience is usually defined as “a dynamic process that generates positive adaptation in a situation where significant adversity is experienced” (Luthar et al., 2000; Bonanno, 2004). An individual indicates resilience, when he/she maintains his/her ability to take action in and adapt to a crisis situation despite being vulnerable during that situation.

Resilience, however, cannot be considered in isolation from an individual’s socioeconomic background. The psychological concept of resilience differs from the ecological one in that it is more sensitive to understanding intentionality. The relationship between resilience and personal, demographic or socioeconomic factors is a central question. Empirical studies indicate, for example, that work situations and wider social resources are resilience-enhancing factors. In addition, studies related to cognitive resources also correlate with individual-level resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). However, the comparatively significant psychological resilience of certain individuals does not mean that those individuals would experience crisis situations as positive events. Rather, it is about recovery and maintaining functional capacity. In addition, the same factors affecting resilience depend on context and may lead to very different reactions. Resilience that

expresses itself as mental stamina is a recognized phenomenon, for example, but psychological research focuses on the factors that influence its evaluation (Bonanno and Mancini, 2008).

For a couple of decades, the organization's research has looked for features related to resilience that are suitable for changing working life and which resilient individuals and organizations use for coping with change. Conner (1993) and Hoopes and Mark (2004) have noticed the following counterparts, which affect from the surprising changes to a stabilization of the situation (Table 1).

Table 1. The counterparts modified from Conner (1993) and Hoopes and Mark (2004)

| Counterparts | Definitions |
|---|--|
| Optimism - pessimism | Optimism: The ability to look at a situation realistically and in a positive light and to see opportunities rather than threats. Pessimism: Will not take any action, because they know that it will not work. Believes that the failures of the past will be repeated in the future, but even worse. |
| Strong self-esteem - a weak sense of self-efficacy | Strong self-esteem: Has a strong sense of basic trust in themselves and their environment. There is also a strong belief in their own ability to influence a situation. A weak sense of self-efficacy: Underestimates their own talents, cannot recognize their own achievements or development. |
| Strong focusing - poor orientation of consciousness | Strong focusing: Always aware of priorities and how to proceed. This can also be called impulse control. The ability to focus on a specific issue and close the mind from irrelevant and disturbances. Poor orientation of consciousness: Loss of focus in critical situations. |
| Flexible thinking – inflexible thinking | Flexible thinking: The ability to consider alternatives, understand cause-and-effect relationships and examine situations from multiple perspectives. In-flexible thinking: Drawing conclusions too quickly and not reconsidering these conclusions even if they prove incorrect. Always consider themselves right. |
| Social flexibility - coping alone | Social flexibility: Understanding how to utilize others' competencies and having the courage to ask for and accept help. Coping alone: Showing mistrust towards others, dealing with problems in isolation |
| Systematic - unsystematic | Systematic: Taking systematic, structured, and disciplined action, and sharing plans with others so that they can participate. Unsystematic: Offering a one-point solution to problems that, from the outside, seems like an improvisation. |
| Risk-taking ability - safety-conscious | Risk-taking ability: Dares to take action to try one direction, correcting direction later if necessary. Safety-conscious: Is risk-averse and waits for clarification in all situations. Proceeds only in safe situations and environments, seems uncertain or procrastinates. |

3. Methodology

The qualitative approach of this empirical study aims to provide an understanding and analysis of micro-entrepreneurial resilience. Qualitative research (Bryman, 1988; Merriam, 2009) explores the ways in which people understand and interpret the significance of their reflections and experiences, in other words, their social reality. The case study strategy used in this study is often selected for research focusing on a particular real-life phenomenon (Ghuri and Grønhaug, 2005). This retrospective multiple case study uses a well-founded research methodology which allows the study to describe actual phenomena in their own context, answering the question "how" without the use of investigators who are the subject of their own research (Yin, 1994).

Compared to single case studies, multiple case studies yield more reliable results (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Baxter and Jack, 2008) and allow for the examination of an issue from multiple perspectives. Multiple case studies are considered more robust and helpful in terms of both generating and testing explanations (Herriot and Firestone, 1983) and they provide a stronger basis for theory building than single case studies (Yin, 1994).

The objectives of this study and the evidence presented are based on interviews with 12 social and health care micro-entrepreneurs in Northern Finland. In these interviews, the subjects reflected on and

assessed situations in which they encountered difficulties or crises related to their business. In-depth interviews are usually conducted with a limited number of participants, allowing them to provide much deeper insight than the standardized and structured interview format (Legard, Keegan and Ward, 2003). This method is particularly effective for small-scale research studies or studies where a lot of research is required before general patterns can start to be observed (Johnson, 2002).

The analysis of the interview data used open coding to identify the main topics of discussion (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The analysis process started with repeated readings of the transcribed text in order to gain an in-depth knowledge of the research subject. Then, open coding was introduced in order to create links and comparisons between topics. This analytical review was associated with continuous comparison of the codes, which helped to explain overlaps and contrast in data, which in turn facilitated building new sub-themes. These sub-themes were evaluated, limited, and categorised with each other by interrogating them further on the codes. By combining relevant sub-themes into separate groups at a higher level, the abstraction level offered emerging thematic groups that secured the theoretical saturation. Table 2 lists the codes, sub-themes, and thematic categories produced by a complete data analysis.

4. Findings

This section provides analysis of the unexpected events, changes or crises occurring in micro-entrepreneurs' case companies and how to categorise those events. The findings are presented in four subsections, each focusing on one of four key thematic categories that emerged from the data: 1) internal intervention, 2) external intervention, 3) wellbeing intervention and 4) tangible intervention (see table 2). These four terms categorise the resilience of micro-enterprises and increase the knowledge related to micro-entrepreneurship.

Codes, sub-themes, and thematic categories describing entrepreneurs' resilience

| OPEN CODES | SUB-THEMES | THEMATIC CATEGORIES |
|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Change of owners, departure, change of focus in business, core business, change in all, lack of control, change of stakeholder groups, threat, interruption, fear, misjudgement, wrong target group, wrong recruitment, correct management, all knowledge only in one person, too fast growth, uncontrollability, dismissal of a worker | The firm's internal affairs; the functional identity of entrepreneurship and ownership; factors related to the business' concept and pressure to change; competence and knowledge about the workforce and its resources; lack of organizational expertise | Internal intervention |
| Political decision-making, feminine industry, maternity leave, problems of cooperation, bureaucracy, competitive bidding, limitations, increased control, authorities, regulatory requirements | Challenges of securing independence in the face of bureaucracy; the specificities of the various sectors and, in particular, the feminine sectors; cooperation and the development of competencies with the various authorities; institutional control over the business | External intervention |
| Uncertainty, justification of existence, vulnerability, identity, inadequacy, lack of fluency, frustration, lack of competence, relocation, loneliness, heavy time | The entrepreneur's physical and mental wellbeing; the entrepreneur's wellbeing at work; need for peer support for entrepreneurs and the possibility of discussion and disengagement | Wellbeing intervention |
| Fire, having to move unwillingly, indoor air problems, ventilation, monetary crisis, foreign currency loans, debt | Expert assistance, counselling and guidance in difficult situations and crises | Crisis intervention |

Internal intervention includes changes to the company's internal dynamics. These can include changes in ownership, management models or personnel. In this study, changes in ownership elicited strong reactions from both stakeholders and staff and required a great deal of time and a lot of mental resources. Such changes may also come from outside the company, for example, a blurring of the core business idea due to a dwindling

number of customers or ineffective market behaviour. However, the root causes of these problems are within the company.

[...] we had to start [to] quickly clarify and reflect on what the purpose of this company is ... why this company exists. (Firm 1, owner)

[...] the workers felt sorrow and disappointment and such a feeling of being betrayed [because] they did not know and they were not told that the other owner would leave and replace the new owner. The company was a very close, small work community, and for the first time I realised that this is also a company. (Firm 3, owner)

External intervention comes from outside the company. It is often a macro level change related to legislation or regulations. Although information and guidance about such changes is often available for business owners, it may be difficult for entrepreneurs to understand how to apply this information to their specific working environment. The slow pace of legislative changes may come as a surprise and there may be uncertainty or additional work involved due to authorities' varied interpretations of new legislation. The social and health sector is currently turbulent, and entrepreneurs feel that they have been part of the so-called "game blocks." Forecasting and planning for a company's future development has become more difficult.

[...] social decision-makers woke up to the need for effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, and then began to drive down such activities as this company produces. We have not succeeded enough to bring enough evidence that we are genuinely an alternative to the forms of service provided by the authorities and decision-makers [...]. (Firm 5, owner)

[...] in proportion to the number of staff in recent years has been the most maternity leave in this company's history. In four years, we have had 13 maternity leave, if I'm not terribly lying. It's a huge amount ... the kids are wonderful, of course, and maternity leave is wonderful, yeah, but if you're thinking of euros and the subordinate arrangements we have to be a substitute and the cost, they are really huge [...]. (Firm 2, owner)

Wellbeing intervention is related to the entrepreneur's own experiences and feelings. Entrepreneurs did not talk about wellbeing at work, but instead about how they coped with difficulties, maintained motivation, or, sometimes, felt inadequate. A lack of delegation or the unwillingness to delegate added to entrepreneurs' sense of inadequacy, as did the feeling that their competence in some areas was insufficient. A sense of loneliness at work was the result of frustration or underestimating their own competence. These issues meant that even a little adversity could temporarily seem more significant. The lack of peer support increased feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

[...] our organizational structure is too vulnerable, because I'm ... the only one who knows these things [...]. (Firm 4, owner)

[...] now there are a lot of balls in the air and there is such inadequate feeling that everything should be done and the employees are out of focus ... Part of my feelings is that the staff feel that the owner does not appear and does not belong and maybe she not even have interest what we are doing here. Do they think that I'm lazy and they just make money for me and the company? (Firm 11, owner)

Crisis intervention refers to a sudden crisis, independent of all the previous categories, which could not be resolved, for example, a fire or an abrupt change in office space due to an existing office being sold. The lack of expert advisers increased resilience, because the entrepreneur felt he would often stay alone.

[...] we can probably set up some moving company, we have been moved so many times during these years. ... There was the situation that in those premises where we were, there was a problem with ventilation. They had rental facilities. (Firm 7, owner)

[...] that was such a very foggy time for me, there were really heavy years. ... We had a foreign currency loan and I called my colleague, another owner, for the loans to be terminated because I had the feeling that something was happening. The prime minister had argued that Finland did not

devalue, and therefore the partner said it was not worth terminating because he trusted the prime minister. In the morning when I woke I heard that at night there was a mark floating or devalued. I called again to a partner if it is time to terminate now? It is no longer worth it, he said [...]. (Firm 9, owner)

5. Discussion

This study aimed to research events, crisis and events faced by micro-entrepreneurs and determine how to classify them. Although there is research on resilience in business, this topic has not been studied at all in the context of micro-entrepreneurship, which is now a socially significant phenomenon. There is thus a natural connection between the existing literature and this study.

The analysis produced four distinct categories of intervention. This categorization can show signs of both ecological and psychological resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno and Mancini, 2008; Folke, 2006; Zolli and Healy, 2011). Internal and wellbeing interventions are the result of a company's internal affairs or the entrepreneurs themselves. External and crisis interventions originate outside the company and are, in some cases, difficult to foresee. This indicates that resilience is not only a matter of personal psychology and behaviour, since environmental factors can play a major role.

When under pressure, performance is emphasized and the ability to adapt to high pressure situations can be a virtue. Fatigue is avoided because it is easily linked to the idea of inferiority. This study also showed that a sense of underachievement can also be linked to negative experiences in one's personal life or a lack of physical fitness and the idea that "I'm not getting better, so I have to do more" can form a dangerous circle. Curiosity, the desire to learn from experience, and determination were engines of change and action. If a person is motivated to persevere in spite of difficulties but they were not determined enough, then nothing happened. In addition, a sense of proportionality is important, that is, the ability to recognise the importance of things in a larger context (Hoopes and Mark, 2004).

Both anticipated and unexpected changes can disrupt a business. But a strong sense of resilience allows individuals and groups to cope with these changes appropriately. As Cheetham and Chivers (1998) argue, self-reflection and resilience are meta competences that are related to learning. Resilience is indispensable and enables better self-assessment. It also augments practical business skillsets.

Entrepreneurs did not interpret their interactions with unexpected or difficult situations as resilience, but rather as the ability to adapt or change—adopting a positive attitude, for example, could create enough confidence to survive a crisis. Several of the entrepreneurs' stories included a very realistic and structured analysis of events. As Coutu (2002) has argued, a realistic approach to handling business problems may lead to such an accurate description of those problems. Compared to Conner's (1993) and Hoopes and Mark's (2004), this is an optimistic viewpoint: entrepreneurs who can analyse a situation realistically and in a positive light see opportunities rather than threats.

6. Implications

6.1 Practical implications

According to Alonso, et al. (2015), micro-entrepreneurs often have to address changes and resolve crises alone. To a micro-entrepreneur, a sudden change can be challenging because he/she does not necessarily have a support network to provide useful or sufficient help. This analysis of the kinds of resilience entrepreneur's show in their careers and how we might categorise these types of resilience creates a greater understanding of the bigger phenomenon of micro-entrepreneurship and how micro-entrepreneurs describe the kinds of resilience they showed. The main finding of this study is that the nature and source of resilience differs on a case-by-case basis and is affected by a larger framework, whether that is the company's internal functions or its macro environment. This study also provides important information for facilitators, business advisers, and institutions working with micro-entrepreneurs.

6.2 Research implications

In general, there is too little research on micro-entrepreneurs, even though they play a significant role in Finnish business. This study offers a new approach to both entrepreneurship and resilience research and provides a starting-point for further research in this area.

7. Conclusions

This study was the first step in researching the resilience of micro-enterprises. The research identified and categorised the factors that contribute to micro-enterprise resilience. The next step is to examine micro-entrepreneurs' experiences of difficult situations or crises, how these situations affected their actions and decisions, and how they resolved these situations. In addition, the relationship between resilience and a firm's growth and success warrants further study.

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