

Entrepreneurial Beliefs and Intentions: A Cross-Cultural Study of University Students in Seven Countries

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have clearly demonstrated that entrepreneurial behaviour is strongly influenced by people's values, attitudes and beliefs. What is more important, beliefs are influenced by the national culture and social context. Nonetheless, even though it might be reasonable to believe that the microeconomic and cultural environments of some countries favour entrepreneurial behaviour whereas others discourage it, further investigation is needed. Accordingly, this paper presents the results of a study undertaken to better understand and compare the intentions, interests and prevalence of university students from Canada, Tunisia, France, Romania, United-Kingdom, Columbia, and Germany. The study also compares these different groups with regard to their beliefs and perceptions about entrepreneurship. Not only does this study allow us to draw up a profile of university students in the seven countries, it also allows us to study the cultural dimension and its possible impact on the students' entrepreneurial activity.

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Keywords: Entrepreneurial intentions; Perceptions; Attitudes; Entrepreneurial prevalence; University students

I. INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has become a priority for several societies. The capacity of new firms to contribute to economic growth (Achs and Armington, 2003), jobs (Birch, 1987) and innovation (Reynolds, Storey and Westhead, 1994) fully justifies the interest they generate. Given this prioritization, universities are increasingly being called upon to play a more active role, in particular by providing their students with education and support that make an entrepreneurial career easier to undertake. The involvement of universities is all the more important given that this career avenue is becoming a more common and necessary choice for students.

Certain studies have focused on the entrepreneurial intentions of university students (Audet, 2004; Boissin and Emin, 2006; Kolvereid, 1996; Tkachev and Kolvereid, 1999). Filion, L'Heureux, Kadji-Youlaeu and Bellavance (2002) showed that 58% of Québec university students intended to start up a business. Similarly, even though Audet (2004) found that only 8% of English-speaking Québec university students intended to start up a business in the short term, 45% of them estimated that there was a 75% chance that they would one day run their own enterprise. These results are consistent with those collected in Russia and Norway (Kolvereid, 1996; Tkachev and Kolvereid, 1999). However, few studies have attempted to understand how the students' values, attitudes and behaviour, that is their entrepreneurial potential, can predispose them to founding an enterprise, creating their own job or having the intention to do so.

Several studies have clearly demonstrated that entrepreneurial behaviour is strongly influenced by people's values, attitudes and beliefs (Krueger, 1993; Krueger and Brazeal, 1994; Krueger and Carsrud, 1993). More importantly, beliefs are influenced by the national culture and social context. Nonetheless, even though it might be reasonable to believe that the microeconomic and cultural environments of some countries favour entrepreneurial behaviour whereas others discourage it, further investigation is needed (Arenius and Minniti, 2005).

Accordingly, this paper presents the results of a study undertaken to better understand and compare the intentions, interests and prevalence of university students from Canada, Tunisia, France, Romania, United-Kingdom, Columbia, and Germany. The study also compares these different groups with regard to their beliefs and perceptions about entrepreneurship. Not only does this study allow us to draw up a profile of university students in the seven countries, it also allows us to study the cultural dimension and its possible impact on the students' entrepreneurial activity. We will begin by examining the theoretical context and our conceptual model, which is partially based on the principles of planned behaviour. We will then explain the research design and presenting the results. Finally, we will discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from these results and the limits of the research.

II. THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

There are several models and theories that explain the complex phenomenon of entrepreneurship. This study draws its inspiration from models described in the scientific literature on the theory of reasoned action and planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991); these models attempt to predict and explain individual behaviour, which in the

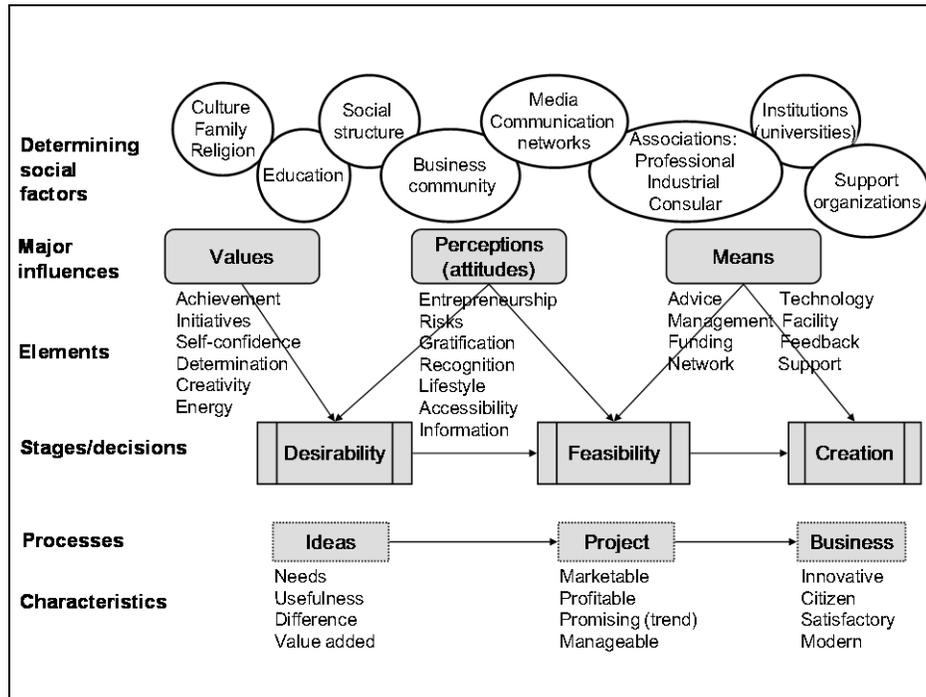
present case is business start-up. Accordingly, we will review the main principles of the models stemming from this area. We will also take a look at the various studies that have examined student entrepreneurship, then a brief discussion on the impact of the cultural dimension on entrepreneurial predispositions.

A. Entrepreneurship as A Decision-making Process

Shapero and Sokol (1982) were among the first authors to use planned behaviour theory in an entrepreneurial context. Their work gave rise to numerous studies whose results have pointed to the usefulness of this theory in understanding business creation (Davidsson, 1995; Krueger, 1993; Krueger and Brazeal, 1994; Krueger and Carsrud, 1993; Krueger and Dickson, 1994; Krueger, Reilly and Carsrud, 2000; Reitan, 1996). According to the authors' reasoning, desirability, perceived feasibility and, consequently, a propensity to start up a business are based on people's beliefs. For Shapero and Sokol (1982), entrepreneurial behaviour is necessarily based on a propensity to act. What is more, this propensity is directly influenced by the perceived desirability and feasibility of a behaviour, which are both explained by a person's beliefs and perceptions about the surrounding world (Boissin and Emin, 2006); these beliefs and perceptions include perceived opportunity, confidence in one's abilities, fear of failure, and knowing another entrepreneur (Arenius and Minniti, 2005). Furthermore, the characteristics (personality traits and demographic variables) known to be specific to creators (Gasse and D'Amours, 2000) are only thought to influence intentions when they affect these beliefs and perceptions. More specifically, perceived desirability refers to how attractive the idea of starting up a business is to people (Shapero and Sokol, 1982). People are particularly influenced by role models in their circle of family and friends (Audet, 2004). Likewise, cultural and social factors directly affect the perceived desirability of entrepreneurial behaviour (OCDE, 1998); social pressure is illustrated, for example, by accepted and respected occupational characteristics. As pointed out by Gasse and Tremblay (2006), intentions are influenced by the perception that the entrepreneurial behaviour is not only personally desirable but also socially desirable. In addition to being desirable, the act of creation must also be reasonably feasible, or at least be perceived as such. Feasibility refers to the degree to which people think they can successfully start up a business (Boissin and Emin, 2006). Feasibility depends, for example, on the perceived availability of the resources needed to create a business, on people's skills and on their confidence in their ability to successfully complete critical tasks in the entrepreneurial process.

Several studies have shown that entrepreneurs possess specific characteristics (Gasse and D'amours, 2000). However, it has also been noted that not only can these characteristics vary according to the type of entrepreneur, but that entrepreneurs' predispositions are also influenced by the surrounding environment. The decision to start up a business can be influenced by various factors. The objective of this comparative study was to verify the role that selected variables played in our model of the entrepreneurial process of university students. The other variables in Figure 1 are only presented to provide a general view of the complexity of the phenomenon.

Figure 1
Entrepreneurial process model



B. The Influence of Culture on Entrepreneurial Behavior

Several studies have attempted to understand and explain the hows and whys of new business creation, but few have looked at it from an intercultural perspective. Two questions in particular require further exploration: why do certain cultures produce individuals who are more inclined to be entrepreneurs than others and how do individual and cultural values affect business creation (Busenitz and Lau, 1996). The results of a study by Arenius and Minniti (2005) suggest that the microeconomic environments of some countries favour entrepreneurial behaviour whereas those of others discourage it. The relation between entrepreneurial behaviour and cultural and intercultural incentives is complex and, especially for the latter countries, requires further investigation. As discussed in the preceding section, the conceptual model presented in figure 1 supposes that cognitive elements such as perceptions and beliefs have an impact on people's behaviour. And given that cognition is influenced by values and social context, culture therefore becomes an important factor to consider. For Shapero and Sokol (1982) moreover, business start-up is the result of social and cultural factors. Following this logic, national cultures, which have an impact on mental patterns, are considered to be a significant predictor of behaviour (Adler, Doktor and Redding, 1986). The results of a study by Uhlaner, Thurik and Hutjes (2002) are in keeping with this idea. These authors pointed out that in countries in which the culture

can be qualified as postmodern, that is which promotes self-fulfilment and quality of life, entrepreneurial activity is less strong. This being true, the authors proposed that measures to stimulate business creation in these countries put greater emphasis on the intangible benefits of business creation rather than on the tangible and economic benefits. Other studies have likewise looked into the relationship between cultural aspects and entrepreneurial behaviour (Busenitz, Gomez and Spencer, 2000; Davidson, 1995a; Huisman, 1985; Lee and Peterson, 2000; McGrath and MacMillan, 1992; Mueller and Thomas, 2000; Tiessen, 1997; Wennekers, Noorderhaven, Hofstede and Thurik, 2002). Knowing that perceptions and beliefs influence entrepreneurial intentions and behaviour, and that national culture can also considerably influence the latter, we thought it worthwhile to compare the entrepreneurial intentions, interests and prevalence of university students from seven different countries. We attempted to better understand how values, attitudes and behaviour predisposed these students to create a business or a job or have the intention to do so.

III. STUDY DESIGN

The study was conducted with a questionnaire addressed to university students from seven countries, namely Canada (more specifically, the Province of Québec), Tunisia, France, Romania, United-Kingdom, Colombia, and Germany. A first data collect was conducted between February 13 and June 5, 2006. The data from Colombia, Romania and Germany were collected during summer 2008, fall 2008 and summer 2009. The total sample comprised 2053 respondents.

A. Questionnaire

As stated above, the goal of this study was not so much to test the predictive capabilities of our model as to compare the entrepreneurial intentions of students coming from seven different countries. Moreover, the questionnaire was designed to shed light on the differences between these groups regarding beliefs about entrepreneurship and perceptions about its desirability and feasibility, dimensions which, according to our model, influence entrepreneurial intentions and behaviour. Furthermore, we attempted to better understand the students' profile, particularly concerning characteristics normally associated with entrepreneurs. A questionnaire on these themes was developed with a paper and electronic version using *Dynaforme*², an on-line tool for self-validated forms that is in which the results are automatically compiled. The questionnaires were filled out by the respondents through e-mail. In some cases, the paper version was given in class. The questionnaire can be seen at the following address: <http://agora.ulaval.ca/~prbrd/formulaire-potentiel-entrepreneurial.htm>. The questionnaire comprises 16 items that evaluate the various dimensions of the model. The questionnaire has been translated from French to English, and then from English to Spanish and German in order to be completed by Colombian and German students.

The respondents were asked about their intentions to start up a business. As other authors have already done (Autio, Keeley, Klofsten and Hesinki, 1997; Gasse, 2003; Reitan, 1996), we verified three aspects of their intentions, namely short-

medium- and long-term, that is during their studies, and right after, or long after graduating. In addition to their intentions, we questioned the respondents about their entrepreneurial behaviour, inquiring as to whether they had started up an activity, organization, association or business during their studies, either in or outside of university. The desirability of entrepreneurship was assessed by professional aspirations. We asked students in which environment they hoped to have a career (large firm, SME, public sector, or non-profit organization). We also asked them if they were ready to take certain risks to reach a high social or professional status. Certain questions allowed us to determine the perceived feasibility of entrepreneurship. For example, the respondents were asked to give their opinion about what hinders entrepreneurial development. They were also asked to identify the factors that influenced entrepreneurial development in the world economy. A few questionnaire items focused on what the students associated with entrepreneurial spirit. Another question dealt with the environments in which entrepreneurial spirit can be developed (large firm, SME, public sector, or non-profit organization). Moreover, the respondents were asked how well their academic activities fostered entrepreneurial minding and how effectively their university courses developed entrepreneurial spirit. Some of the items dealt specifically with the respondents' personality. The students had to note, on a scale from 1 to 4, their level of agreement with certain statements such as: "I am generally creative, full of ideas and open to change." The students in the sample were also questioned about such themes as risk, independence, self-sufficiency, self-confidence and ambition. Finally, they were asked to identify the motivations that could give them the incentive to create their own business. Six more questions concerning gender, age, education level, field of study, professional experience, and presence of entrepreneurs in the family helped to determine the students' profile.

B. Sample Characteristics

Of the 2053 respondents, 341 came from Canada, 209 from Tunisia, 312 from France, 410 from Romania, 239 from United Kingdom, 102 from Colombia and 440 from Germany. Most of the respondents were from 21 to 24 years old, with men representing 37.3% to 61.2% of the sample, depending on the country. For the majority of the sub-samples, respondents were mostly in the business field, whereas the others studying engineering. Most of the students were enrolled in the bachelor's program, and the big majority already had some professional experience. In more than 40% of the cases, a family member ran his or her own business. The sample presents a few notable differences depending on the country of study. In particular, a large majority of the Tunisian and Colombian respondents (88 and 77%) were between 21 to 24 years old, whereas this category was not as dominant among the other countries' students. Moreover, the proportion of students in a bachelor's program was much larger for the Canadian and Colombian students, representing almost all the respondents (98 and 100%), whereas for the French, Tunisians and Romanians, a considerable proportion was in a master's program (35, 63 and 77%). Furthermore, the proportion of students who had some professional experience was slightly smaller among the Tunisian students at 58%, all other countries showing at least 78.3% of respondents with professional experience. Finally, a greater proportion of the Canadian, UK and Colombian respondents had at least one close family member who ran his or her own

business. Slightly more than 50% of the Canadian respondents, 55% of the UK and 62% of Colombian students were in this situation, as opposed to 29% of the Tunisians and 42% of the French and Germans.

IV. RESULTS³

A. Beliefs and Perceptions about Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship can be associated with various notions and beliefs which vary according to culture and dominant values. Our results highlight some of the differences in the students' beliefs as a function of their place of study. One difference that stands out is that British, Colombian and German students associated entrepreneurial spirit with business creation elements, whereas Canadian, French, Tunisian and Romanian students were more likely to associate it with project development and business management. It also appears that German students are more likely to consider setting up a Not-for-Profit Organisation (NPO) as entrepreneurial spirit (19% as opposed to a rate from 4 to 13% for other countries).

Canadian, British and Colombian students were more likely to believe that entrepreneurial spirit can be developed in the public sector. We also observed that Canadian and Colombian, and in a lesser way, also French and German students, are likely to believe that non-profit organizations lend to the development of entrepreneurial spirit. For instance, 86% of the Canadians and 87% of the Colombians, but also 71% of French and 73% of Germans felt that entrepreneurial spirit can be developed in non-profit organizations as compared to 38% for the Tunisian students, 59% for the Romanian students and 63% of the British students. It is also worth noting that the Tunisian and Romanian students were much less likely to believe that entrepreneurial spirit can be developed in large firms, the public sector or non-profit organizations.

As concerns beliefs and perceptions about entrepreneurs, Tunisian, German and British students were significantly more numerous (23%, 21% and 22%) to consider that entrepreneurs choose action over knowledge than were their Canadian, French, Romanian and Colombian counterparts (13%, 12%, 17% and 13%). At 58%, they were also more numerous to associate entrepreneurs with invention, as opposed to less than 35% for students from all other countries.

B. Personality Traits and Individual Characteristics

A low percentage of the French, Canadian, Tunisian, Romanian and German students considered that they were born entrepreneurs, ranging from 11 to 15%; but more than 25 % of the Colombian students did, followed by British students with 19% considering themselves as born entrepreneurs. However, 64% of the Canadian students, 71% of the Tunisian students, 57% of the French students and 76% of the Colombian students felt that they were enterprising people. Colombian students and Canadian students, at 68% and 67%, were also more likely to take on difficult and ambitious tasks as opposed to 53% for the Tunisian students and only 36% for the French students. In all countries, at least half of the students are willing to take risks to achieve social status; but the

proportion of Colombian, Romanian and Canadian students who do so is larger, with 83%, 76% and 67%.

The German students were more likely to believe themselves to be creative than were other students, scoring 3.92 on a scale of 4 as compared to scores between 2.95 and 3.35 for other countries. The German students appreciated the independence and self-confidence that come from creating a business more than did the other two groups, scoring 3.84 on a scale of 4 as compared to mean score between 3.08 and 3.27 for other countries.

C. Perception of Feasibility

As concerns obstacles to entrepreneurship, opinions varied little, though the German and French were more likely to identify “overly complex procedures for the creation and management of a business” as a sizeable obstacle (51% and 44%, as opposed to a rate from 19% to 38% for other countries). The “lack of support and help” represents an obstacle for 48% of the British students, a percentage quite higher than other countries. Moreover, unfavourable economic conditions seemed to represent a larger obstacle for the Tunisian and German students (37% and 39%) than for the other countries (between 19% and 25%). We can also see that Colombian students are quite less to perceive the lack of profitable opportunities as an obstacle to entrepreneurial development, with only 9%. In contrast, lack of profitable opportunities is considered as an obstacle for 59% of German students.

With regard to the factors that influence the development of entrepreneurship in the world economy, the Canadian, Romanian and German students accorded more importance than the other groups to people's personalities (51%, 54% and 60%). Canadian and German students, at 58% and 64%, accord importance to political conditions and the support system. As for the Tunisian students, they accorded less importance to the support system; only 18% compared to 24% to 53% for their counterparts. Finally, education system appears to be an important factor for Colombian and German students (57% and 61%).

Whatever their nationality, the respondents generally considered that certain academic activities (projects, initiatives, job placements, simulations, etc.) fostered entrepreneurship in the students, the percentages varying between 79 and 95% for all countries. However, with regard to the courses taught in their universities, these proportions decreased considerably, percentages being between 20% and 40%. Colombian students are the exception with a proportion of 82% of them considering that the courses developed the entrepreneurial spirit.

D. Perception of Desirability

As for professional aspirations, the Tunisians, Romanians and Colombians distinguished themselves considerably from their counterparts, with 77 and 70% hoping to work in a large firm, as opposed to 61, 52, 45 and 44% respectively for other countries. Moreover, less than 20% of the Tunisian students and only about 30% of the British and Romanian students wished to work in a small or medium-sized business, whereas 65, 62, 47 and 41% of the German, Canadian, French and Colombian students had this ambition. On the other hand, whereas 33, 27 and 20% of the German, British

and Canadian students were hoping for a career in the public sector, only 13% of the French students, 9% of the Tunisian students, 8% of the Colombian students and 5% of the Romanian students wanted to do the same. Finally, the German and Canadian respondents were the most attracted to non-profit organizations at 32% and 12% as compared to 1 to 8% for the British, Colombians, Tunisians, Romanians and French.

The motivations for creating a business depended on the country of study. In particular, the Canadian students were more motivated than other countries' students by the desire to accept a challenge (54%). Canadian, Colombian and German students are also more motivated to achieve the personal fulfilment that can come from business creation (73, 75 and 79%). The motivation with the higher percentage for Tunisian and Romanian students is "be your own boss".

E. Intentions and Prevalence

Some of the respondents had already created, alongside their studies, an activity or business, either at university or outside it. The proportion of students in this situation varied from 16 to 32% for Canadian, Tunisian and French students; in the Colombian sample, however, there are about 63% of students that have already created a business. With the Tunisian students, Colombian students are also the most inclined to consider entrepreneurship, with respectively 88 and 93% of them thinking of eventually creating a business, for the most part, immediately after graduating. The Romanians were next, though most of them were considering an entrepreneurial career in the long-term. Intentions to start up a business were somewhat lower among the German, British and French students. Indeed, the French students expressed the fewest intentions in the short-, medium- and long-term.

V. DISCUSSION

The act of entrepreneurship is stimulated by a combination of factors relating to individual such as attitudes and perceptions. The influence of environment on these dimensions is today beyond doubt. Although the role of environment and context is recognized, entrepreneurship is often assumed to be a common concept across cultures. The results presented here shows that countries have differences in beliefs, attitudes, perceptions that their people, especially university students, maintain on entrepreneurship and entrepreneur; they also have differences in their intention to create a business. This article presents the initial results of a study conducted to: 1) better understand the entrepreneurial intentions, interests and prevalence of university students in business and engineering from Canada, Tunisia, France Romania, United-Kingdom, Colombia and Germany 2) compare these groups with regard to their beliefs and perceptions about entrepreneurship; 3) investigate the role played by certain variables in the entrepreneurial process of university students.

Moreover, the data can provide some insight into the entrepreneurial profile of each country participating in the study. For example, France has a less developed business culture, where entrepreneurial intentions are lower and where students are less likely to consider themselves born entrepreneurs. In addition, procedures are perceived as too complex, a brake on development of entrepreneurship. Romania has a high rate of students who intend to start a business. In general, students aspire to work either in a

large enterprise or SME. The concept of risk associated with entrepreneurship does not frighten them, and although the education system is perceived as a factor that may influence the development of entrepreneurship, in the opinion of students, current courses do not seem to develop entrepreneurship. Like Romania, Tunisia has a high rate of entrepreneurial intentions, and many students intent to create a business right after graduation. However, the entrepreneurial culture seems to be in development; the number of students with an entrepreneur in their family is lower than in other countries. The concepts of innovation, new product development and invention seem also strongly associated with entrepreneurship. The UK has a more traditional concept of entrepreneurship: strongly linked to the creation of a business, personal achievement and money. Career in large firms and the public sector are also more attractive. For Colombia, perceptions of entrepreneurship are related to a need for achievement, combined with business creation. This country also shows a high rate of entrepreneurial activities and intentions. The educational system and the climate conducive to innovation are considered important factors of influence. Germany shows the lowest rate of intentions and entrepreneurial activities. Entrepreneurship is strongly related to project development, business creation, and profitable opportunities; as well, complex procedures for the creation and management of a business seem to be perceived as sizeable obstacles in this country.

Many of the university students polled had thought eventually creating their own business or being self-employed. The percentage of students with entrepreneurial intentions was 68%, a somewhat higher rate than the 57.7% found by Filion *et al.* (2002) in a sample of Québec students, or the 32.5% observed by Gasse and Tremblay (2006). It is worth noting however that, contrary to Filion *et al.* (2002) and Gasse and Tremblay (2006), the intentions in the present study investigated both business creation and self-employment, and involved, in addition to the Canadian (Québec) students, university students from other countries. The results of the present study point to greater short- and medium-term intentions than did those of Gasse and Tremblay (2006). Indeed, the short- and medium-term intentions were 15% and 31% here, whereas they were 7.9% and 14.8% in the previous study.

Although these results are preliminary, they tend to show that the university students' intentions towards, beliefs about, and perceptions of entrepreneurship differed from one country to another; however, these analyses require further exploration. Likewise, as there were only 16 items in the questionnaire, the impact and interpretation of the results remain limited. The study nonetheless opens up some interesting avenues with regard to both the entrepreneurial profile of the university students in the seven countries, as well as their perceptions and beliefs about entrepreneurial activities.

ENDNOTES

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2. <http://cours.fsa.ulaval.ca/dynaforme/>
3. More details, results and tables are available from authors on request.

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