



Autonomy as a start-up motive

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Marco van Gelderen

*Department of Management and International Business, College of Business,
Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand, and*

Paul Jansen

*Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

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Abstract

Purpose – Autonomy is a primary motive for a large majority of small business starters. As an explanation of why people want their own (autonomous) business it is tautological. This study sets out to focus on an explanation of the autonomy motive itself: why small business starters want autonomy.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with a sample of 167 nascent entrepreneurs.

Findings – There are two types of autonomy motives: a proximal motive which is associated with task characteristics of being self-employed (decisional freedom), and distal motives for which autonomy is instrumental (to avoid a boss or restrictions; to act in a self-endorsed and self-congruent manner; and to be in charge).

Research limitations/implications – Autonomy measures should either operationalise autonomy only in a proximal sense without regard to underlying motive sources, or take distal motives into account and offer items that reflect these autonomy motive sources.

Practical implications – Persons who resist bosses and rules now must be a boss and set rules themselves. People who want to express their personality and creativity in their work might be so busy and occupied that there will be little space left for personality and creativity expression. People who want autonomy because of the power and control it brings them may find that as a small business owner they have to deal with several types of uncertainty. Practitioners must resolve these tensions.

Originality/value – In spite of the intimate relationship between freedom and entrepreneurial motivation, this is perhaps the first paper to focus exclusively on autonomy as a start-up motive.

Keywords Business formation, Freedom, Small enterprises

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The question what motivates people to set up their own business has been studied extensively. A central theme to emerge in these studies, is that the business starter wants autonomy (also labelled as independence or freedom) (Blais and Toulouse, 1990; Shane *et al.*, 1991; Birley and Westhead, 1994; Gatewood *et al.*, 1995; Kolvereid, 1996; Feldman and Bolino, 2000; Carter *et al.*, 2003; Shane *et al.*, 2003; Wilson *et al.*, 2004). People start businesses (amongst other reasons) in order to be autonomous, and in many cases the success of their firm is instrumental for achieving that goal. In spite of its empirically proven importance, the research that is currently available on autonomy



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as a start-up motive is scarce. To our knowledge there is no article that focuses on autonomy as a start-up motive *per se*, which stands in bleak comparison with the attention that other psychological constructs such as need for achievement and risk taking have received. This lack of specific attention paid to autonomy seems strange, and the only explanation appears to be that it is taken for granted.

In our opinion, this is unjustified. The relevance of the topic is evident on the individual level, as the question of whether autonomy is indeed realised, will be crucial in understanding the individual's satisfaction with self-employment, which will subsequently explain firm outcomes. If small business starters are after autonomy, then the attainment of autonomy should be part of measures of success. For this reason, also the topic of how individuals cope with threats to their autonomy is also highly relevant to small business starters. Active measures to promote autonomy as well as cognitive dissonance reduction strategies can be studied here.

Autonomy as a start-up motive is also relevant on a macro-economic level. The relations of the autonomy motive with growth, employment, and innovation are interesting and relevant for policy. For some business starters, autonomy may be associated with firm growth, as a big firm may be less vulnerable and dependent than a small one. However, for (most) others, autonomy is associated with being small: expecting to experience more freedom when there is little to be concerned about. Employees may mean more freedom, as operational aspects of the business can now be left to others. It can also be perceived as entailing less freedom, as one now has the responsibilities and worries connected with employing others. Concerning innovation, autonomy is linked to creativity, as an autonomy orientation inherently means that one does something different, with less concern for what is conventional. Still, innovation may be limited when autonomy is the primary goal.

In this paper we will address yet another issue, relevant for its managerial implications. There is an element of circularity in people wanting to have an autonomous (independent) business because they want autonomy (independence). Therefore, we will focus on the explanation of the autonomy motive itself. Our research question is: why do small business starters want autonomy? Based on theoretical arguments and empirical data, our conclusion will be that while most small business starters begin a business because they want autonomy, they vary in the reasons why they want autonomy. Business starters like autonomy for the sake of decisional freedoms, but in addition also because autonomy is a necessary condition for the realisation of still other motives. The managerial as well as the research implications of our findings are discussed at the end of this paper.

The concept of autonomy

Autonomy as a start-up motive

The existing literature on autonomy as a start-up motive is not only small, it is also weakly developed. First, research on start-up motives generally assumes that they exist independently of each other. For example, Gatewood *et al.* (1995) find that "identification of a market need" is the most offered reason for getting into business. Although the discovery of an opportunity has motivating properties, without considering why someone would like to fill this market need, not much knowledge about career reasons is gained. Because of the circularity mentioned above that is inherent in people wanting an autonomous business because they want autonomy, it

becomes important to investigate the role of other start-up motives in relation to autonomy. This is even more important as almost all small business starters attach great importance to autonomy. In fact, even a control group of non-business starters values autonomy as much as nascent entrepreneurs do (Carter *et al.*, 2003).

Second, few efforts have been made to link autonomy to a theoretical framework. The typical approach has been to categorise start-up motives empirically by means of factor analysis. In these cases a number of *ad hoc* sampled items originally designated to represent different theoretical start-up reasons are *post hoc* labelled as autonomy. For example, Blais and Toulouse (1990) report on a 14-country study of start-up motives. Factor analysis generates “need for independence” as the factor with the largest explained variance. Items originally referring to an “independence” conceptualisation of autonomy belong to the factor (e.g. control own time; own approach to work; work with people I choose; be my own boss; lead, rather than being led). However, the same factor also includes items that theoretically were labelled as “escape” (avoid unreasonable boss), and as “accommodation” (greater flexibility in life; work with people I like).

Studies that use open response formats fare better in terms of consistency, but still define categories on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, Kolvereid (1996) classifies the responses of MBA alumni for choosing either for an entrepreneurial career or for organisational employment. Of those who prefer self-employment 40 per cent lists autonomy as the prime reason. Responses such as freedom, independence, being one’s own boss, and choosing one’s own methods are listed as autonomy. Examples of other categories distinguished by Kolvereid are authority (15 per cent, items such as being boss, control, responsibility), self-actualisation (12 per cent, realise dream, creative need, create something), and challenge (19 per cent, challenging, exciting, inspiring, motivating). However, it may well be that these are motives that all require a certain degree of autonomy in order to be fulfilled. Whether Kolvereid’s categorisation is correct from a theoretical point-of-view, and whether we can arrive at a conceptualisation and subsequent operationalisation of autonomy that will cause (e.g. factor) analyses to generate homogeneous factors, will be investigated in this paper.

A motivational definition of autonomy

Our conceptualisation of autonomy rests on the treatment of the subject by philosophers. They first point to the Greek roots of the term. Autonomy is derived from two words: self (*autos*) and rule or law (*nomos*). While the Greeks discussed autonomy with respect to the relationships between states, in the eighteenth century the term starts to refer to individuals (Lindley, 1986). Autonomy becomes an important theme for political philosophers as they discuss the relationship between the state and the individual. According to the large majority of the (western) political philosophers, the state should not interfere with the autonomy of the individual (providing “negative freedom”), and according to some, the state should even enlarge the autonomy of the individual (providing “positive freedom”, for example by providing education and jobs). Although individual differences in opinion exist on details (Dworkin, 1988), broad consensus is that autonomy means that individuals make their own choices independent of others (Metaal, 1992). People who value autonomy strive for a state of independent self-determination. In this paper we will consider the three elements of this

definition (independent, self, determination) as motivational sources of autonomy. Based on this conceptualisation of autonomy we expect small business starters to differ individually in their respective emphasis on independence (“others do not determine what I will do”), on self-congruence (“I want to do my own things”), and power to decide (“I want to be the one that sets the rules”).

These three motives all require a certain degree of autonomy in order to be fulfilled at work, implying that autonomy is instrumental for their realisation. Using the distinction between “distal” and “proximal” motivators (Kanfer, 1990, 1994), they can be denoted distal motives for starting a business. Distal motives guide the establishment of an individual’s behavioural intentions and choice between alternative courses of action. Distal constructs have indirect impact on behaviour and performance (Kanfer, 1990, 1994). With respect to sources of autonomy that are more proximal to work behaviour, we will elaborate on a conceptualisation of autonomy that concerns task characteristics of a work situation (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Breugh (1999) distinguishes three so-called “decisional freedoms” with respect to the what, how, and when aspects of work. He labels these as criteria, method, and scheduling autonomy. These aspects of autonomy are proximal motivators as they are sources of motivation located in the work itself. They are motivational constructs that control the initiation and execution of actions during engagement with the task.

On account of the literature, our proposition is that there are two types of autonomy motives: one proximal motive associated with task characteristics (decisional freedom), and three distal motives for which autonomy is instrumental (to avoid a boss or restrictions; to act in a self-endorsed and self-congruent manner; and to be in charge).

Method and results

Sample

Our sample consisted of nascent entrepreneurs: people who are busy setting up a business. We choose to use a sample of nascent entrepreneurs because we wanted to reduce survivor bias by studying all people who try to start a business, not only those people who currently run a business. The sample was collected by randomly calling phone numbers. The person who answered the phone was asked: are you currently, alone or with others, setting up a business? If the person answered affirmatively, two exclusions were made. First, it is essential to be active in setting up a business. If he or she is only dreaming about starting up a business, he or she was considered a potential entrepreneur instead of a nascent entrepreneur. Second, someone who set up a business that is already operational, even though in a start-up phase, must be considered an entrepreneur instead of a nascent entrepreneur (Reynolds *et al.* (2004) report details of the methodology used). In this manner, out of 21,393 phone interviews, a random and representative sample of 517 nascent entrepreneurs was created. This sample of 517 nascent entrepreneurs was subsequently studied in four follow-ups (results are reported in Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2005). Eventually, 60 per cent had succeeded in setting up a business and was still in business, 10 per cent had succeeded in setting up a business but was already out of business, and 30 per cent had not succeeded in setting up a business (Van Gelderen *et al.*, 2005).

For this study nascent entrepreneurs were interviewed three years after they were first contacted. As 33 persons had stated that they did not want to be contacted anymore, 484 persons were contacted three times by telephone. In total 193 persons

were interviewed. In terms of non-response, participants showed no difference with the remaining sample in terms of age, gender, education, business success (getting started/abandoning the start-up effort), and business ambitions. Disadvantage of this procedure is that people needed to remember why they wanted to start a business three years ago. Whether people were able to come up with an account was tested and confirmed in a pilot study ($n = 20$). Still, perception of relevant motives etc. might have changed in the meantime. On the other hand, it might also be possible that people offer more accurate information looking backwards because of having a helicopter view instead of being in the middle of it. Table I gives some sample characteristics.

Procedures and classifications

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Pilot studies showed that the research question, why people want autonomy, could not be asked directly. In these pilots, respondents were first asked what autonomy meant to them. Then they were asked why they wanted the particular aspects they just mentioned. The large majority of respondents were not able to answer the question. They typically either did not answer the question at all, or they repeated their answer to the first question (e.g. Q:

Variable		%
Sex	Male	75
	Female	25
Age	18-24 years	4
	25-34 years	42
	35-44 years	34
	45-54 years	17
	55-64 years	4
Education	Low/middle	49
	High	51
Small-large firm	Wants small firm	80
	Wants large firm	20
Sector	Industry	10
	Trade	16
	Business services	31
	Consumer services	16
	Other	27
Make a living-rich	Make a living	87
	Become rich	13
Team	Solo	61
	Team	39
Start-up capital	€0-4,500	32
	€4,500-22,500	37
	€22,500-45,000	13
	> €45,000	18
Part-time-full-time	Start out part-time	51
	Start out full-time	49

Table I.
Sample characteristics
($n = 167$)

what does autonomy mean to you? A: that you can make your own decisions. Q: why do you find that important? A: because then you can make your own decisions). Besides the fact that autonomy for many people is an end in itself, we believe that responding difficulties were caused by the high level of abstraction of this question. Thus, in the main study a variety of indirect approaches were taken. Indirect evidence (not asking about autonomy directly) was first obtained by asking the respondents to tell the story of their start-up effort: how it started, what happened, and how it ended up. The respondents were also asked about their motives for setting up a business, their goals and the advantages of self-employment as compared to organisational employment. Up to this point the interviewee did not know that the phone interview was about autonomy. Then, the respondents were asked whether autonomy was important to them (in the context of starting one's own business). If not, the interview was discontinued.

If autonomy was considered to be important – this was the case for 167 out of 193 persons – they were asked what autonomy meant to them. This question functioned as a second indirect measure of the sources of the autonomy motive. Table II gives an overview of their answers. Row 1 gives the frequency of the answer “freedom” without reference to a work aspect. Proximal motivational sources of autonomy are decisional freedoms with respect to the what, how, and when aspects of work (Breugh, 1999) (rows 2 and 3 in Table II). Compared to previous research on autonomy in the workplace, which typically is conducted with employees, business starters emphasise one more aspect: responsibility for decisions and results (row 4 in Table II). For the expression of the distal motivational sources reference was made to autonomy as being instrumental to the fulfilment of other motives (rows 5, 6 and 7 in Table II: to avoid a boss or restrictions; to express one's personality and creativity; to be in charge). Still some other meanings were expressed (row 8), notably the instrumentality of autonomy for the appropriation of income. Respondents could give as many meanings as they liked.

Using the entirety of indirect measures, respondents were coded as to whether they emphasised a distal source of autonomy. For example, people would be scored for the power motive if someone would indicate that he or she started a business because he or she felt a lack of decision power in his or her previous job. Answers to the question what autonomy meant to the respondents were also used as a basis for classification. Answers reflecting proximal autonomy were distinguished from answers reflecting distal autonomy by means of the particular terminology used in giving the description

	<i>n</i>	% (<i>n</i> = 167)
Freedom	31	19
Making one's own decisions about work goals and methods	74	44
Regulating one's own time	39	23
Responsibility for decisions and for results	26	16
No boss/no rules	39	23
Self-congruence/self-endorsement	25	14
Being boss/being in control	30	18
Other (e.g. earning your own income)	10	6

Table II.
Meaning of autonomy to respondents

of autonomy (e.g. “that you can make your own decisions” would be scored as a proximal aspect, while “that you are at the steering wheel” would be scored as a distal power/control motive). The avoid boss/rules motive was scored for 71 persons (43 per cent), the self-endorsement/congruence motive for 55 persons (33 per cent), and the power/control motive for 57 persons (34 per cent). Note that people can score on more or less than one distal motive. In fact, 14 persons (8 per cent of sample) scored on all three motives, 63 persons (43 per cent) scored on two motives, 72 persons (38 per cent) scored on one motive, and 18 persons (11 per cent) scored on none of these motives.

In the third part of the interview the strength of the distal sources for wishing autonomy was quantified. For example with respect to the avoid boss/rules motive the respondents were asked: “one reason to consider autonomy important could be that you dislike working under a boss or to work under externally imposed rules. To what extent does this apply to you?” Then a four-point scale (not important, neutral, important, very important) format was read out to the respondent. A question about the value attached to autonomy as an end in itself (row 1 in Table II) was added to this list of motives. Table III gives the means and standard deviations of the motive scores derived from the four-point-scales.

The frequency distributions show that the avoid boss/rules motive is not present for half of the sample, while being important or very important to nearly the other half. The other motive sources are generally considered important. Chi-square analysis shows that the open question-categorisations and the four-point scale scores are significantly associated: avoid boss/rules χ_2 28.13, $p < 0.01$, endorsement/expression χ_2 11.91, $p < 0.01$, decision control/power χ_2 8.64, $p < 0.05$. When looking at the four-point scale correlations, it can be seen that the power motive correlates negatively with the boss/rule avoidance motive ($r = -0.30^{**}$). This is also the case with the open format results (χ_2 11.90, $p < 0.001$). This result is interesting as it indicates that it does not necessarily mean that people want decision power themselves when they dislike being ordered, and vice versa. Using the open response format motive scores as dummy variables, we checked for associations with other variables in the nascent entrepreneurship dataset. The power motive was positively associated with being male (χ_2 6.76, $p < 0.01$), with being higher educated (χ_2 4.58, $p < 0.05$), and with the amount of intended start-up-capital (t -value 2.19, $p < 0.05$). The self endorsement/expression motive was positively associated with starting out in retail/trade (χ_2 11.23, $p < 0.01$), and negatively with starting out in business services (χ_2 4.44, $p < 0.05$). There was no association of any of the three motives with eventual success in setting up a business.

Discussion

One of the most important drivers for self-employment is that people want to run a business themselves instead of working for someone else. A large majority of small

Autonomy in order to achieve ...	Not important	Neutral	Important	Very important	M	SD
Independence: avoid boss/rules	83	10	43	30	2.12	1.22
Self: endorsement/congruence	13	11	61	82	3.27	0.89
Determination: decision control/power	29	7	81	50	2.91	1.02

Table III.
Frequency distributions of the distal motive scores

business starters like to be responsible, to decide on strategy, to decide on working methods, and to regulate their own time. This is called autonomy. Still, our exploratory research supports our proposition that small business starters differ in their relative emphasis on reasons why they like autonomy. Many like autonomy for the sake of decisional freedoms. However, people also need freedom as a necessary condition for the fulfilment of other motives. Some are motivated by negative freedom, in the sense that they generally dislike or are currently experiencing a difficult boss or unpleasant rules. Others emphasise the fact that self-employment offers the opportunity to work in accordance with one's goals, values, and attitudes. Still others emphasise the opportunities that self-employment offer for being in charge, for directing, and for leading instead of being lead. Our empirical work shows that these are the main underlying sources of the autonomy motive. They are conceptually associated and often simultaneously present; still when interviewing small business starters about how they got into starting a business it is often easily noticeable that the interviewees emphasis mainly one or two of these sources. So Kolvereid (1996) was indeed correct in distinguishing autonomy, authority, self-realisation, and challenge. He has left implicit, however, that these motives have specific underlying relationships.

From a research perspective the differential impact of the multiple sources of the autonomy motive is interesting as it illustrates that distal constructs are not irrelevant to studying small business owners. The study of distal constructs such as personality traits is generally considered to be outmoded in entrepreneurship research (Delmar, 2000), and has been replaced by more proximal constructs such as attitudes or behaviour (Rauch and Frese, 2000). However, this research shows that while on the proximal level all may appear the same, distal influences may still be relevant. For researchers who study small business motives using questionnaires, the implication is that they should either operationalise autonomy only in a proximal sense without regard to underlying motive sources (e.g., items such as "regulate own time" or "making one's own decisions"), or take all distal motive sources into account and offer items that reflect these autonomy motive sources.

A next step is to develop a questionnaire for each motive source in order to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis that might corroborate the motive source pattern that was distinguished and found in our study. It should be noted however, as our results show, that in many cases more or even all motive sources may be present. Future research should establish whether the presence of more or stronger motive sources strengthens the autonomy motive as a whole, or whether one must think of the emphasis on motive sources as profiles (Law *et al.*, 1998). For the moment, our research only points at the presence of different sources of the autonomy motive. This already has a number of implications.

For people who train small business owners, it is important to know what aspect a trainee who is motivated by autonomy emphasises. Trainees can claim to be motivated by autonomy as an end in itself while at the same time instrumental, distal sources are operating. These sources bring along their paradoxes and pitfalls. Persons who resist bosses and rules now must be a boss and set rules themselves. Their resistance of constraints and restraints might make it difficult for them to deal with the pressures of customers and suppliers. People who want to express their personality and creativity in their work might be so busy and occupied that there will be little space left for personality and creativity expression. Moreover, their focus on self-endorsement and

congruence might make it difficult for them to deal with controlling forces and circumstances that small businesses are often confronted with. People who want autonomy because of the power and control it brings them may find that as a small business owner they often have very little control, if only because they have to deal with several types of uncertainty. A focus on power and control might also make it difficult to empower employees and to retain a relaxed attitude. Trainers and educators in the small business field can make their clients and students aware of these tensions and help them to find appropriate ways of coping.

Starting or running a business means that a line is drawn – within bounds it is now the small business owner who is autonomous. However, drawing a boundary will not make the outside world go away – on the contrary. Autonomous small business starters and owners deal with customers, suppliers, competitors, etc., on a continuous basis, and in doing so need to balance their autonomy wishes with the demands imposed on them by the business environment. Freedom and constraints of freedom are at the heart of the entrepreneurial motivation and practice. The study of how autonomy driven small business starters and owners manage to attain and retain a state of autonomy is therefore an important line of future research, along with a study of the factors that threaten the experience of autonomy.

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About the authors

Marco van Gelderen is Senior Lecturer at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand. Marco van Gelderen is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: m.vangelderens@massey.ac.nz

Paul Jansen is Professor of Industrial Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.