



An entrepreneurial journey: reflecting on “me-search,” “we-search,” and the non-WEIRD

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Abstract In this presentation, accepting the Global Award for Entrepreneurship Research, I highlight the importance of me-search and we-search in generating research opportunities. I highlight how me-search provided the experiences and motivation for me to explore how (1) entrepreneurs can regulate their grief over business failure to learn from the experience, and (2) locals to a disaster can instantaneously create new ventures without any profit motive (or commercial logic) to alleviate the suffering of others. I also highlight how we-search provided the experiences and motivation for me to explore how (3) entrepreneurship can help individuals navigate chronic adversity, and (4) local scholars can substantially contribute to the field by exploring entrepreneurship in non-WEIRD contexts. I hope that other scholars generate research ideas through me-search and we-search, especially when these processes lead to published entrepreneurship research in non-WEIRD contexts because this is where, I believe, there are many opportunities to advance our understanding of entrepreneurial phenomena.

Plain English Summary In this presentation, I reflect on how lucky I have been to work with wonderful co-authors exploring entrepreneurship over the last three decades. First, I discuss my experiences

with the failure of my father’s business and how this led me to explore how entrepreneurs regulate their grief to learn from business failure. This “grief” study was my first step in researching the relationship between entrepreneurship and the emotions of failure. Second, I discuss how a bushfire in Australia that “took out” my auntie’s house and created substantial devastation for a community motivated me to explore compassion ventures, entrepreneurs’ resilience, and other responses to adverse events. Finally, I discuss my fascination with researching entrepreneurship in contexts different from my own and different from what is mostly covered in the top journals—chronic adversity and other non-WEIRD contexts. Colleagues from these contexts have been essential for helping to turn this motivation into specific, publishable studies.

Keywords Business failure · Chronic adversity · Disasters · Non-WEIRD · Re-search · Resilience · We-search

JEL Classification I22 · I24 · I32 · J15 · J16 · J17 · J24 · J62 · J71 · L26 · L31 · O15

1 Introduction

It is an absolute honor to receive the Global Award for Entrepreneurship Research and to deliver this presentation. For this presentation, I decided to reflect on my scholarly journey by focusing on how I began

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three of my research streams. The first two streams are based on “me-search” and the third is based on “we-search.” By me-search, I mean researching something from my personal experience (see Shepherd et al., 2021c; Wiklund, 2016), and by we-search, I refer to combining me-search at a research team level. My first me-search began three decades ago (wow, I just realized how old I am).

2 Me-search into business failure

In 1995, I was a doctoral student in Australia, teaching undergraduate and MBA students about entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurship textbooks rarely mention business failure. When they did mention business failure, it was discussed as an opportunity to learn and a motivating event. However, during the semester, I received a phone call from my father. He told me that the family business he had created before I was born was performing poorly. I asked him how bad it was, and when he told me, we concluded that we had to close the business immediately. The business failure meant that we lost everything, and my father was emotionally devastated. It was a traumatic experience for him and the whole family. After the bankruptcy, I felt uncomfortable teaching entrepreneurship students about the benefits of failure because my experience with my father was inconsistent with the implicit assumption that learning from failure is automatic and instantaneous.

Several years passed before I reached a career stage where I could write a paper for my satisfaction, given that I believed it had little chance of ever being published. I went to the library and took out every book on death, bereavement, and grief because I thought I could build on these psychological tools to find a way to help entrepreneurs like my father. In the psychology literature, grief is defined as the negative emotional reaction to the loss of something important that has been experienced by people who have faced amputations, cardiac surgery, and divorce. I had to simply link the importance of the business to my father to recognize that he had experienced grief when the business failed. It was not surprising that this grief disrupted his ability to learn from the experience and required time and help to recover from the event. From the literature, I developed a model of learning from failure. Because it was such

an unusual paper, with its foundation in the bereavement literature, I thought there was little chance it would be accepted for publication. If it was going to be rejected, then I may as well be rejected by the best. I submitted it to the *Academy of Management Review*, and to my surprise, they gave me a revise and resubmit, and eventually published the paper—Shepherd (2003)—eight years after my father’s business failed.

I extended this research on grief and learning from failure to, for example, the grief over the failure of a family business (Shepherd, 2009), projects within an entrepreneurial organization (Shepherd et al., 2009a), and projects within a scientific research organization (Shepherd et al., 2011). I also explored why some entrepreneurs experience more grief than others and how self-compassion (Shepherd & Cardon, 2009) and anticipatory grieving (Shepherd et al., 2009b) can help these entrepreneurs recover more quickly from the grief triggered by the failure of their business.

While I continue the above stream of research, another adverse experience inspired me-search on another topic.

3 Entrepreneurship as a response to adverse events

In 2009, I was celebrating my birthday with my family in Australia. It was hot. Hot and windy. During the party, dad took a phone call and then announced, “Shirley is alive; Shirley is alive.” He said there had been a bushfire in country Victoria, and Shirley’s house had burned down. She had lost her dogs, horses, and everything she owned except the clothes she was wearing. She had been in town playing bingo. If she had been home, she would have died. Indeed, 173 people lost their lives on “Black Saturday.” The bushfires caused thousands of people considerable financial, physical, and emotional suffering.

Many months later, Trent Williams (a doctoral student at the time) and I read a series of victim statements and noticed that some victims created new ventures in the aftermath of the disaster to help alleviate the suffering of other locals. These ventures were created in hours or days, rather than the months and years of “normal” new ventures, and they had no motivation (or mechanism) to generate a profit (Shepherd & Williams, 2014). Indeed, the more successful they were (in alleviating the suffering), the quicker

they did themselves out of business, which was a good thing (i.e., they had successfully alleviated the targeted sources of suffering and therefore there was no rationale to continue [although some adapted to a new purpose]). We were fascinated to understand more about this compassion venturing (Shepherd & Williams, 2019; Williams & Shepherd, 2016a, 2018).

While learning about compassion ventures in the Australian context—a developed economy with considerable resources, we wondered what compassion venturing would be like in a developing-country context. Trent suggested we explore compassion venturing in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake. He traveled to Haiti to collect the data, which generated new insights into the different types of compassion ventures (Williams & Shepherd, 2016b) and how compassion ventures and their targeted communities co-evolved (Williams & Shepherd, 2021). Our research on compassion ventures (in Australia, Haiti, Germany [Mittermaier et al., 2022, 2023], and elsewhere) led us to explore the relationship between entrepreneurship and the resilience of individuals, organizations, and communities (Shepherd & Williams, 2023; Williams et al., 2017).

This research on entrepreneurial responses to adverse events was uppermost in my mind when Vinit Parida, Joakim Wincent, and I brainstormed research ideas. Vinit was originally from India, where there is considerable and persistent poverty. The combination of our personal interests and backgrounds led us to explore entrepreneurial responses to chronic adversity (i.e., we-search).

4 Entrepreneurial response to chronic adversity

We were interested in understanding resourcefulness by exploring entrepreneurship in the resource-scarce environments common throughout India. We found that, indeed, “necessity is the mother of innovation.” In rural India, individuals engaged in *jugaad*—an “assertive defiance, trial-and-error experiential learning and the recombination of available resources to improvise a frugal quick-fix solution” (Shepherd et al., 2020a, p. 87). These solutions were highly novel and useful. Still, during the review process, one reviewer challenged our assertion that our study was about innovation. The reviewer suggested that the study could not be about

innovation because the novel and useful solutions did not provide the firms a sustainable competitive advantage. We realized that in communicating our research conducted in this unusual context (a sample not often explored in the top management and entrepreneurship journals), we had to navigate gatekeepers’ Western perspectives and assumptions successfully. We found a way that helped us with subsequent papers.

While continuing to explore entrepreneurial responses to chronic adversity in rural locations (e.g., women’s entrepreneurship in rural India [Chatterjee et al., 2022] and rural Bangladesh [Shahriar & Shepherd, 2019]), we also began exploring entrepreneurship in urban locations, specifically, the slums of India. We were fascinated by many of the things we were learning. For example, we found that while previous research has highlighted how low socioeconomic neighborhoods in developed economies have weak communities, slum residents told us about how their community was strong and helped support them and their businesses. In particular, we were interested to learn that these entrepreneurs were not motivated by any personal outcomes (extrinsic or intrinsic rewards) but solely focused on feeding and educating their children because they believed this was the path to escape poverty; they believed that while they would not escape poverty, they could lay the foundation for future generations to do so (Shepherd et al., 2021a).

From this sample of slum entrepreneurs across a range of industries, we then focused on the most destitute of the slum entrepreneurs—ragpickers. Rag-pickers are self-employed individuals who comb the mountains of wealthy people’s rubbish to collect and sell recyclable items. We were fascinated to find that while these individuals were stigmatized by their dirty work, low caste, and slum neighborhood, they formed a “functional ambivalence” to find meaning in their work (Shepherd et al., 2022a). From the ragpickers, we recognized that the slum is home to a thriving recycling industry.

Recycling is a dirty business, consistent with the notion of dirty work in the management literature. Indeed, we found that when the individuals are stigmatized by their low caste and living in a slum, they have little choice but to be self-employed in dirty work—dirty entrepreneurship (Shepherd et al.,

2024).¹ While these entrepreneurs recognized a lot of “dirt” in this context, one had to have a “clean” reputation in this industry because the entrepreneurs’ work was so tightly intertwined. Interestingly, we found that while these entrepreneurs did not intend to help the environment with their recycling work, the collective outcome of their “dirty entrepreneurship” positively impacted the natural environment.

5 Non-WEIRD entrepreneurship research

Reflecting on my me-search and comparing it to my we-search, I realized that the we-search involved samples that were quite uncommon in the top entrepreneurship journals. I found that scholars in other disciplines had noted that, for example, much of their research had been (and is being) conducted on WEIRD samples—people from contexts that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. Fascinated by what I was learning about entrepreneurship from my we-search, Joakim Wincent, Sarah Chase, and I highlighted the need for more non-WEIRD entrepreneurship research (Shepherd et al., 2025).

We are not saying that there has not been any entrepreneurship research in these contexts (indeed, quite the contrary, there are some excellent entrepreneurship studies in these contexts and calls for research on specific subtopics, such as calls for more entrepreneurship research in the poverty context). Still, most research published in the top entrepreneurship journals is based on WEIRD samples. I firmly

¹ We also found that some impoverished individuals believed they had little choice but to engage in illegal entrepreneurship. While some illegal entrepreneurship can be considered productive by the local community (e.g., refugee entrepreneurship [Shepherd et al., 2020b]), we found other entrepreneurial ventures destroyed value by harming the natural environment (Chase & Shepherd, 2025; Shepherd et al., 2022b), trafficking humans against their will (Shepherd et al., 2022c), and extorting corrupt payments (Shepherd et al., 2021b). Of course, illegal and destructive entrepreneurship occur in most contexts worldwide. I believe these topics are underexplored (partly because of the data-collection challenges), and future research on illegal and destructive entrepreneurship will make important contributions to the entrepreneurship literature.

believe that significant contributions to the entrepreneurship field will come from entrepreneurship research in (and of) non-WEIRD contexts. I hope this presentation will encourage more me-search and we-search of non-WEIRD entrepreneurship.

6 Conclusion

I humbly accept this award. However, I do so under the full recognition that I did not do it alone. I have been very fortunate, professionally and personally, to have had so many wonderful co-authors. I would love to mention them, but that would be impossible. I take some comfort from believing they know how I feel about them. Thank you! The same goes for my family, who are part of the “me” and the “search” of my journey. Finally, this is not the end of my academic journey. Indeed, I believe (or hope) the best is yet to come. Receiving this award and giving this presentation has allowed me to reflect on where I have been, which renews my excitement for my current research projects and the terrain yet to be discovered.

Declarations

Competing interest No competing interest.

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