

Narratives of Enterprise: Crafting Entrepreneurial Self-Identity in a Small Firm.

Simon Down. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2006. 144 pp. \$85.00.

Narratives of Enterprise describes Simon Down's ethnographic research on two entrepreneurs, Paul and John, who co-founded a small U.K.-based firm building fenders for ships. These two entrepreneurs moved from working as middle managers in a large corporation to building their own company, operated as entrepreneurs successfully for a number of years, then sold the company and reentered their previous large corporation in more senior management positions. The research focuses on how the two co-founders made sense, explained, and motivated themselves to engage in entrepreneurial activity. This is an interesting sociological account of how two individuals created a new and seemingly functional entrepreneurial identity for themselves—an identity that is dynamic and transient—by building various justificatory and motivating stories, or narratives, for themselves and for people interacting with them. Individuals emphasize certain life events and reflections that allow them to build a coherent story about who they are, what they do, and why they perform their roles. Down relates these self-identity building narratives to four different themes: relationships, generations, space, and clichés.

The relationships theme shows Paul and John making sense of their interpersonal interactions at work. The co-founders' exclusive and affective bond-building activities between themselves and with the nascent business created mutually supportive work identities. Down argues that their narratives created an emotional refuge for both individuals to realize and create an entrepreneurial sense of self, which enabled them to act as entrepreneurs. The generations theme describes how Paul and John used their interactions with older, more senior corporate managers to explain how they became frustrated with corporate life and interested in an entrepreneurial career and continuously differentiated themselves as representing the young, dynamic generation struggling to work with senior managers who belonged to the old, conservative past. The space theme shows how the two entrepreneurs crafted their various narratives and presented themselves to suit the various locations in which they operated: their office, their home, the customers' sites, or the local drinking pub. These entrepreneurs' attempts to individualize and control these various spaces experienced mixed success, as people they interacted with, including their employees, sought to assert their own sense of self and control.

Finally, the clichés theme details how Paul and John relied on various common entrepreneurial motives and desires to help define their entrepreneurial self-identity through narratives, including accounts that emphasize the entrepreneurs' bravery and willingness to take more risks than the stereotypical corporate bureaucratic manager, their personal high ambition for success and desire to grow their company, and their strong desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency. These rhetorical accounts seem incongruent at times with the reality of entrepreneurial life, which is often constrained by other resource

Book Reviews

holders, but Down argues that these narratives helped Paul and John consolidate and maintain an entrepreneurial sense of identity by delineating key elements of corporate life that they rejected and opposed. These entrepreneurs defined who they were by what they were not.

Down's conceptualization of these identity-crafting themes draws on the works of scholars such as Giddens (1991), Den- nett (1993), and Sennett (2000). Down has the merit of bringing these entrepreneurs closer to us, who have had or may one day perform an entrepreneurial role in a particular stage of our life. The research emphasizes the incremental building of an entrepreneurial identity that supports this transient role and supports previous scholars' call to pay less attention to the stable traits of individuals who create new organizations and focus on what they do. Down contends that individuals mobilize selectively their various narrative resources to suit the context and dynamically emphasize various narratives to explain and motivate the execution of their various roles, whether as an entrepreneur or corporate manager. These entrepreneurial narratives are partially an illusion, as Down observes that, in actuality, there are many similarities between the life of an entrepreneur and that of a corporate manager, both at and outside of work. But this illusion is functional in that it enables people to pursue entrepreneurial activity. This is one of several insights that I got from reading this book, and I am thankful to Down for having articulated and illustrated it.

Although the author intends to write a readable book for both academics and practitioners, I suspect that both groups will find some sections of the book challenging to grasp. The book is more likely to interest scholars who work on the soci- ological, dynamic crafting of personal identity than it will the traditional corporate manager, who may be more interested in learning about new ways to deal with business challenges. Also, the wording of certain passages is quite complicated, at least for me, and I wonder if the author would not have achieved even greater impact by using simpler words and expressions. In addition, some conceptualizing passages are illuminating, but there are others that seem tacked on with seemingly little value added, partly perhaps because they are difficult to understand. Though I found chapter 2 on self-iden- tities concisely written and chapter 6 on clichés illuminating, I found chapter 3 on relationships and chapter 4 on genera- tions a bit drawn out. But these are matters of personal taste. I advise the academic reader to browse through the book and read more carefully those sections that are of per- sonal interest. This effort is worthwhile, as the reader is likely to get some gems out of this book, as I did.

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