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How Parental Influence Assures Start-up Success for First-Time Founders: German Evidence

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the influence of parents on the development of traits and skills important for first-time entrepreneurs in Germany in order to evaluate how this parental influence affects the success of the entrepreneur. Mixed methodology was used for data collection and analysis – in-depth interviews with 20 first-time founders of German start-ups, and a survey questionnaire completed by 401 participants. Two hypotheses were tested, which related to personal traits for start-up founder success and to professional characteristics; in each case, the entrepreneurs provided a general ranking of characteristics, followed by a ranking of parental influence on the same traits.

Our findings suggest that while parental influence might significantly shape their children's approach to entrepreneurship, its direct impact on business success is not conclusively evident. The results imply that educational bodies, policymakers, and practitioners in the entrepreneurial ecosystem could utilize these insights to better tailor support for start-up founders, e.g., creating specialized education programs or mentorship opportunities emphasizing the beneficial aspects of parental influence.

Key words

Personal and professional characteristics, business success, parental influence, first-time founder, start-up, Germany.

Introduction

The success of many established entrepreneurs, whose initial business venture was a start-up, is frequently associated with the influence of their parents (Duchek, 2018). In recent years, the

relationship between family influence and start-up success has become of increasing interest to researchers from multiple specialisms, for example, from the perspectives of parents as role models and family support (Cardella et al., 2020), as well as socio-economic status that affords them a valuable family contact network (Roth and Blažková, 2023), financial support, and access to quality education (American Psychological Association, 2023). Although the focus is often on the youngest entrepreneurs aged twelve and older, whose success is attributed to family support, participation, and stimulation (Marinova, 2016), many have not embraced entrepreneurship until later in life. In Germany, for instance, 27.9% of start-up founders from 2013 to 2019 were aged between 35 and 44 years (Rudnika, 2021), implying that parental influence may endure, as this research subsequently demonstrates.

Despite high levels of research interest into the degree of influence parents have on the success of their offspring's first start-up, and the proliferation of German first-time start-ups reported as 5,312 from 2017 to 2020 (Startupdetector, 2020), very few empirical studies have been published by German academics. The systematic review conducted by Cardella et al. (2020) comprised 92 studies published in the 30 years up to 2019 and included just four published in Germany. However, while the main study finding was that parents had the biggest impact on their children's intention to become entrepreneurs, the emphasis of the German studies was on the influence of role models for attaining such goals. The focus of this study was to establish the extent to which parental influence stimulated individuals of varying ages to become founders of start-up companies, and how the personal and professional traits the founders acquired from their parents impacted the level of their success.

Given the fact that self-employment entry is a frequent topic of economic studies (e.g., Soleimanof et al., 2021; Dvouletý and Orel, 2020; Pittino et al., 2018), it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the German economy with approximately 21,600 start-ups (Startupdetector, 2022) employing approximately 415,000 people between 2018 and 2020 (Pfluger et al., 2021). Their economic impact is indisputable, as is their influence on German competitiveness (Roth and Blažková, 2023), which concerns not only technological sectors but also traditional sectors such as agriculture and food, where, for example, 258 start-ups were created in Germany in 2022, i.e., 9.7% of all newly founded start-ups this year (Startupdetector, 2022). Since the start-up failure rate is 20% in the first year and 90% overall (Minaev, 2021), identifying the factors that support longer-term survival is vital for heightening awareness among potential start-up founders, academics, and practitioners who support their initiation and development. A large proportion of studies suggest that parental support belongs to major survival factors (e.g., Marks, 2021; Cardella et al., 2020), inferring that it is important to provide reliable evidence that this is actually the case.

Therefore, we strive to fill this research gap by examining the extent of parental influence on the success of their child's first start-up. Thus, the aim of our paper is to evaluate the influence of parental traits on the success of first-time founders in Germany. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods are used in our study, allowing for relevant conclusions and implications to be drawn.

Material and methods

This research adopted a pluralist stance, owing to the necessity of initially exploring subjective opinions among first-time founders regarding parental influence on the success of their start-ups, and subsequently validating the main findings by means of the objective stance (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, exploratory and explanatory research designs were employed in two separate but linked parts, while theory development relied on the inductive

approach in the case of the first research and the deductive approach in the second (Saunders et al., 2023)

Mixed methodology was used for data collection and analysis, specifically the two-stage explanatory design comprising qualitative methods as the first stage, analysis of the findings, and retesting them in the second stage by means of quantitative methodology. This design is particularly suitable when the current understanding of the phenomenon is relatively poor, so that the qualitative element represents the main contribution associated with a generic theoretical standpoint, such as a specific group, which is the context of this research (Creswell, 2009)

Therefore, in the first phase of this study, primary data were collected by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with a purposive sample of 20 first-time founders of German start-ups (Saunders et al., 2023). The semi-structured interviews comprised a logically ordered set of open questions, which had the purpose of encouraging the interviewees to provide facts and feelings regarding the influence of the family on their start-up's success. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis, a highly systematic approach involving coding occurrences of the main findings by category (Mayring, 2014), which overcomes the perceived limitation of qualitative methods as highly subject to researcher bias and allows the readers to check the claims made in the research.

Subsequently, the main findings formed the basis for a quantitative survey questionnaire comprising category, rating, and ranking questions. Participants were asked to rank seven personal characteristics they considered most important for entrepreneurial success (i.e., ambition, perseverance, risk-taking, self-motivation, sense of responsibility, goal orientation, courage), and then to rank parental influence as a source of acquisition of these characteristics. The next questions were related to eight professional characteristics (i.e., qualification/education, ability to accept feedback, learning by doing/from mistakes, tendency to explore new things/innovative thinking, intrinsic motivation to do something new by yourself, socialization to network effectively with experienced/knowledgeable people, decision-maker/problem solver, leadership – self-belief, inspire self and others), whereas participants first ranked the traits generally, followed by asking the founders to order them from the highest to the lowest one according to their perception of having acquired them by means of parental influence.

The questionnaire was distributed by email and direct contact via LinkedIn. In total, 1,500 first-time start-ups were approached, and 401 completed the questionnaire. The personal outreach to participants likely contributed to the high response rate, which enabled the testing of two hypotheses to verify the findings from the qualitative interviews:

Hypothesis I: The acquisition of important personal traits for successful entrepreneurs is dependent on the degree of parental influence on these traits.

The null hypothesis (H₀): The acquisition of important personal traits for successful German entrepreneurs is not dependent on the degree of parental influence on these traits.

Hypothesis II: Professional skills and characteristics required by successful entrepreneurs are dependent on the degree of parental influence.

The null hypothesis (H₀): Professional skills and characteristics required by successful German entrepreneurs are not dependent on the degree of parental influence.

Two complementary analyses were applied to assess linear relationships, namely Spearman's Rho selected for its suitability with ordinal data and robustness with non-normally distributed

data, and Pearson's correlation coefficient (as used e.g. by Balcarová et al., 2014). The data was analysed using SPSS software (Pallant, 2020).

The data on start-ups was provided by the German company Startupdetector, a provider of market data and information on the German start-up market (Startupdetector, 2020, 2022). For the qualitative study, details of a total of 501 start-ups, which had been founded between December 1, 2017, and December 31, 2020, were made available. This sample is derived from a total of 8,136 German start-ups founded in that period, of which 5,312 were first-time start-up companies. The final sample was randomly generated for this research by Startupdetector (based on personal communication with Mr. Bräutigam, the managing director of Startupdetector, held on November 12, 2021). The interviews were conducted from early January to mid-March 2022.

The first-time start-up companies, as defined by Startupdetector (2020), were identified by referencing the German Trade Directory, which provides the name and date of inception. Additionally, Startupdetector used data from the LinkedIn platform to check whether the start-up owner had previously founded a company abroad. Individuals who had held CEO positions in passive holdings, such as asset management or real estate, were not excluded, as this experience was not considered relevant. The limitation in identifying a first-time start-up was a lack of knowledge regarding whether an individual co-founded a company but was not the CEO. Each of the 501 start-ups was contacted by email, telephone, or through the professional social media platform LinkedIn to request their participation in the research. We encountered many refusals from the 501 start-ups contacted, but once 20 interviewees were identified, a sufficient cohort was reached to gather a broad range of facts and opinions.

Table 1 shows the personal profiles of the start-up participants in the interviews. The twenty experts in the sample comprised 3 females and 17 males. The age range at start-up was between 16 years and 38 years; the female group were all over 30 years, whereas the male participants ranged from 16 to 36 years, with the majority being less than 26 years old. The academic attainment of the participants varied considerably, from secondary school certificate to doctorate level, and male founders had a higher average academic achievement than female founders. The highest qualifications of the three female entrepreneurs were an Advanced Technical Certificate, a Bachelor's degree, and a Master's degree. Parental academic qualifications also varied considerably, from no qualifications to a doctorate. Just three parents were self-employed, two of whom were parents of a female founder, while nine fathers were employed in professional roles, and four mothers were teachers.

Table 1: Characteristics of 20 first-time founders in qualitative semi-structured interviews

Code	Age Range	Gender	Highest Qualification	German State	Age Start-Up formed (Years)	Parents' Occupation	
						Mother	Father
E1	26-35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	21	Teacher	Engineer
E2	26-35	Male	Master's Degree	North Rhine Westphalia	26	Teacher	Teacher
E3	26-35	Male	Master's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	26	Works in Nursing Home	Sales Representative
E4	18-25	Male	Secondary School	North Rhine Westphalia	19	Teacher	HRM Administrator
E5	26-35	Female	Bachelor's Degree	North Rhine Westphalia	34	Housewife	Driver
E6	18-25	Male	Secondary School	Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	16	Teacher	Doctor
E7	26-35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	21	Dental Assistant	Sales Manager
E8	18-25	Male	Secondary School	Hamburg	19	Geriatric Nurse	Bus Driver
E9	36-45	Female	Master's Degree	Saxony	38	Dental Assistant	Engineer
E10	18-25	Male	Secondary School	Berlin	21	Legal Compliance	Sales Manager

E11	18-25	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Hamburg	19	Piano Teacher Primary School	Board Director
E12	18-26	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	23	Secretary for Constr. Company	Programmer at SAP
E13	26-35	Female	Advanced Technical Certificate	Baden-Württemberg	31	Self-Employed Dental Assistant	Self Employed Therapist
E14	26-35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	23	Self-Employed in HR	Banker Senior Consultant
E15	26-35	Male	Master's Degree	Bavaria	24	Paralegal	Self Employed
E16	26-35	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Rhineland-Palatinate	30	Office management	Telephone Systems Engineer
E17	36-45	Male	Doctorate	North Rhine Westphalia	33	Housewife	Self Employed
E18	18-25	Male	Secondary School	North Rhine Westphalia	16	Beautician	Industrial Electrician
E19	26-35	Male	Master's Degree	North Rhine Westphalia	29	Cosmetician	Agriculture Responsible For German District
E20	26-36	Male	Master's Degree	Baden-Württemberg	28	Employed by DAX group	Doctor

Source: Prepared by authors

In the quantitative study, a probability sample was employed, based on the population in the region in Germany where the study was focused, with a 5% margin of error. For instance, a population of 10,000 and 100,000 would require a minimum of 370 and 383 participants, respectively, to return fully completed questionnaires (Saunders et al., 2023). The newly selected random sample, obtained from Startupdetector, comprised 1,500 first-time start-ups that commenced between January 1, 2017, and June 1, 2023. The number of start-ups with first-time founders recorded in this time span was 9,929 (based on personal communication with Mr. Bräutigam, the managing director of Startupdetector, held on June 9, 2023). In addition, we obtained the LinkedIn addresses of all first-time founders and subsequently contacted them via LinkedIn and email, attaching a link to the questionnaire. A total of 401 first-time founders participated in the quantitative survey, which was conducted between mid-July and mid-September 2023.

The structure of these survey participants is shown in Table 2. The most numerous were first-time founders aged 25-35 (65.6% of all participants), who were predominantly male (74.3% of all participants). As shown in Table 2, most participants have a university degree – more than 80% of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree.

Table 2: Structure of survey participant

Age	Frequency	Percent Values	Cumulative percentage values
18-24	61	15.2%	15.2%
25-35	263	65.6%	80.8%
36-45	70	17.5%	98.3%
46-55	6	1.5%	99.8%
55+	1	0.2%	100.0%
Gender	Frequency	Percent Values	Cumulative percentage values
Female	97	24.2%	24.2%
Male	298	74.3%	98.5%
Divers	6	1.5%	100.0%
Highest Qualification	Frequency	Percent Values	Cumulative percentage values
Abitur	51	12.7%	12.7%
Bachelor	132	32.9%	45.6%
Master	160	39.9%	85.5%
Doctor/PhD	34	8.5%	94.0%
Misc.qualifications	24	6.0%	100.0%

Source: Prepared by authors

Results and discussion

In general, the participants considered that their parents had influenced the personal qualities and values they possessed in relation to creating a successful first start-up. The qualities mentioned included perseverance, ambition, motivation, security, and stability, with the acceptance of making mistakes, openness to evaluating new ideas, confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness, a sense of responsibility, respect for others, independence, and the importance of retaining their principles. Of those listed, perseverance and the ability to network to exchange information and improve knowledge were the most often cited (more than half of the respondents mentioned them), which corresponds with Pirhadi et al. (2021). Acquiring social skills was particularly stressed by founders, who attributed their success to a contact network developed early in life that had led to the acquisition of many valuable business contacts. Parental know-how or the lack of a contact network was emphasized, e.g., by E11 and E20. *“My dad motivated me early on to use LinkedIn... I registered there in 2016/17, and I was almost always told that I have to build a network”* (E11). The need to be able to network recognised by E20 was directly related to his mother’s influence: *“My mother said to me network only harms those who don't have it... My mother has a large circle of well-known friends, many colleagues with whom she keeps in touch. I think I take after my mother more”* (E20). Parents were also acknowledged for encouraging the founders to focus on their education and value education. Two participants (E3 and E13) had acquired high-level academic qualifications owing to the support their parents had given them and encouragement to be ambitious. In a wider sense, for some founders, the wider family network also had an expectation that they would succeed. One founder (E11) admitted that his father, having a doctorate, was the driving force of his ambition, and that he would probably not have been as ambitious in another parental context. As E11 said: *“If my dad hadn't had his doctorate in economics, I certainly wouldn't have been so ambitious at school”*. The importance of parental influence to gain qualifications corresponds with other studies, such as Tarling et al. (2016) and Velez-Grajales and Velez-Grajales (2014). However, the findings are contrary to those of Jayawarna et al. (2014), which found that formal education was less important than other skills and values acquired from parents. Some participants emphasized parental influence in encouraging continuous self-improvement and regular discussions about how their careers were pursued. Psychological support provided by parents during the setting-up period was also mentioned several times (E1, E15, E20), for instance, financial support, which would also be there if the business failed. In contrast, several of the founders (e.g., E9, E16) denied that financial support and parental contact networks had been a major factor in their success.

Two participants described how their parents had helped them enhance their intellectual abilities, with one citing divergent thinking and creativity (E15), and another understanding risk from learning chess with his father and being encouraged to get involved in competitive sports (E16). Another founder (E4) emphasized how he had learned to build the stamina to complete tasks that he disliked: *“My mother in particular taught me, even in the early years of my childhood, to follow through with things even if I didn't enjoy them that much. And this enabled me to develop a bit of stamina at a young age, which I now need every day”*.

In contrast, one founder (E6) emphasized that his parents' education had no influence on his success because his parents were not entrepreneurs and had not participated in the business at all, while another participant (E4) emphasized the negative parental influence on his success due to being expected to please everyone, which resulted in a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. A surprising insight regarding the influence of the geographical location of the family home on start-up success was mentioned by two interviewees. One participant (E1) stated that moving from a small rural village to a large wealthy location instilled a more open ambitious mindset and enhanced communication skills, which is in line with Villalba (2014).

The other one (E9), who had grown up in East Germany, had acquired a high sense of insecurity, i.e., a barrier to start-up success mentioned, e.g., by Wee et al. (1994), which impacted on his confidence as a founder. Other family-related factors that impacted on the founders' success were having too much security owing to being the youngest family member who was too cosseted, too much financial security especially when the parent worked in a large company and expected the offspring to do so, or as a result of one parent relying on the high earnings of the other parent, which tended to reduce the incentive to rely on oneself.

To validate the findings from in-depth interviews, the quantitative survey was conducted, and two hypotheses were tested. In order to test HI, the participants initially ranked the most important personal traits for entrepreneurs and subsequently ranked the same traits perceived as acquired from parents. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Personal Trait Ranking and Parental Influence

Personal Attributes	Rank	Acquired from parents (number of participants that marked the attribute)
Self-motivated	1	144
Goal orientated	2	195
Risk taker	3	120
Ambition	4	184
Perseverance	5	140
Courage	6	151
Sense of responsibility	7	235
Spearman's Rho Correlation		0.32143
P-value		0.48207
Pearson Correlation		0.39916
P-value		0.37503

Source: Own calculation

The findings demonstrate the founders regarded self-motivation and goal orientation as the most important personal traits for entrepreneurs, with a sense of responsibility ranked lowest. However, sense of responsibility was the trait most likely to be acquired from parents, with goal orientation second and risk taker least likely. However, the results indicate a weak positive correlation for parental influence on personal characteristics (Spearman's Rho was 0.32, Pearson's was 0.40). Moreover, this correlation is not statistically significant (Spearman's Rho p-value was 0.48, Pearson's p-value was 0.38). This means that the acquisition of important personal traits for successful German entrepreneurs is not dependent on the degree of parental influence on these traits, therefore, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Subsequently professional characteristics were ranked by importance for entrepreneurial success and by acquisition from parents, i.e. HII was tested, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Professional Trait Ranking and Parental Influence

Professional Characteristics	Rank	Acquired from parents
Learning by doing/from mistakes	1	213
Intrinsic motivation to do something new by yourself	2	125
Leadership - self-belief, inspire self and others	3	142
Decision maker/problem solver	4	159

Socialisation to network effectively with experienced, knowledgeable people	5	112
Tendency to explore new things/innovative thinking	6	145
Able to accept feedback	7	179
Qualifications/Education	8	221
Spearman's Rho Correlation		0.30952
p value		0.45564
Pearson Correlation		0.21245
p value		0.61347

Source: Own calculation

Learning by doing and from mistakes and intrinsic motivation were ranked as the most important characteristics, with qualifications and education ranked the lowest, while the latter was ranked first in acquisition from parents, learning by doing second, and socialization lowest. Among the key findings, a notable aspect was the entrepreneurs' perception of professional characteristics. Interestingly, despite the high level of educational attainment among the participants (32.9% with a Bachelor's degree, 39.9% with a Master's, and 8.5% with a Doctorate), education was ranked as the least important professional trait. This indicates a potential underappreciation of formal education's role in entrepreneurial success, suggesting that the founders may not have fully recognized or reflected upon the importance of their educational background. The p-values in this case also demonstrate that the findings are not statistically significant; weak correlation is evident for parental influence on professional traits so that the null hypothesis is not proven.

Conclusion

This study explores the influence of parents on the development of traits and skills important for first-time entrepreneurs in Germany. Our findings suggest that while parental influence might significantly shape their children's approach to entrepreneurship, its direct impact on business success is not conclusively evident. An intriguing finding is the apparent disconnect observed among the entrepreneurs: they ranked education as the least important professional trait, despite their high level of educational attainment. This suggests a possible underestimation of the role of formal education in entrepreneurial success.

The implications of this study are significant for educational bodies, policymakers, and practitioners in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, who could utilize these insights to better tailor support for start-up founders. This might involve creating specialized education programs or mentorship opportunities that emphasize the beneficial aspects of parental influence.

As one of the few empirical studies in Germany on this subject, this research sheds light on an under-explored area, contributing valuable perspectives to both academic discussions and practical applications. The study's limitations, such as its sample size and geographical focus, should be considered, yet it underscores the importance of considering family background in the broader narrative of entrepreneurship and success.

Future research should investigate how parental influence affects entrepreneurs who lacked strong parental support, focusing particularly on how these effects vary across different age groups. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of parental influence in varying entrepreneurial contexts.

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