Influenced by the lives of others: narratives of role modelling throughout the start-up process

Riccardo Nucci, Orla Byrne & Dimo Dimov

Published online: 16 Jun 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⎘

Article views: 228

View related articles ⎘

View Crossmark data ⎘

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

⌀ OPEN ACCESS   Check for updates

Influenced by the lives of others: narratives of role modelling throughout the start-up process

Riccardo Nucci[a], Orla Byrne[b] and Dimo Dimov[c]

aBrunel Business School, Brunel University London, London, UK; bCollege of Business, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; cSchool of Management, University of Bath, Bath, UK

ABSTRACT

This study uses a narrative approach to explore how role modelling unfolds throughout the start-up process. Drawing on the experiences of 25 nascent and novice entrepreneurs, we illustrate how attributes of role models, role modelling outcomes, and related mechanisms change for entrepreneurs over time. Our emerging theoretical model highlights three distinctive role modelling narratives: 'Taking the Leap', 'Learning the Trade', and 'Soothing the Nerves'. Our work expands existing role modelling research in entrepreneurship by looking beyond the impact of role models on entrepreneurs prior to starting-up and highlighting that role modelling continues to unfold and influence entrepreneurs throughout the start-up process.

Introduction

Many entrepreneurs report having had 'significant others' influence their decision to start new businesses (Bosma et al. 2012). Role modelling is a developmental process in which individuals actively observe, adapt, and reject characteristics of exemplary others (Gibson 2003). Role models include iconic entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk and Steve Jobs as well as family members, employers, or former colleagues who – though their entrepreneurial experience – inspire (Van Auken, Fry, and Stephens 2006), serve as examples to be emulated (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017), and stimulate other people to become entrepreneurs (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011; Mungai and Velamuri 2011; Vaillant and Lafuente 2007).

Entrepreneurship research has highlighted the multifaceted effects that role modelling has on the decision to start a business. For example, having self-employed parents or knowing other business-owners increases one's likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur (Chlosta et al. 2012) and leaving organizational employment for self-employment (Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Mungai and Velamuri 2011). Scholars find that entrepreneurial role models increase entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011; Laviolette, Radu Lefebvre, and Brunel 2012; Radu and Loué 2008), decrease fear of failure (Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016), and provide inspiration and opportunities for learning throughout the entrepreneurial journey (Bosma et al. 2012; Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017). Indeed, the existence of role models explains different levels of entrepreneurial activity between regions and countries (Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007).

Despite these advances, there has been limited focus on the impact of role models on entrepreneurship beyond one's decision to become an entrepreneur. While some work shows that role

---

CONTACT Riccardo Nucci ✉ riccardo.nucci@brunel.ac.uk Brunel Business School, Brunel University London, Eastern Gateway, Kingston Lane UB8 3PN, United Kingdom

models can be a source of support to entrepreneurs *after* they have created their business (Bosma et al. 2012) and that role models continue to provide opportunities for learning and development (Zozimo, Jack, and Hamilton 2017), the question of how role modelling impacts entrepreneurs throughout the subsequent stages of the start-up process remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, research in education (Hermanns and De Winther 1971; Lockwood, Marshall, and Sadler 2005), organizational studies (Gibson 2003; Ibarra 1999), and sport (Adriaanse and Crosswhite 2008) suggests that role modelling continues to exert influence even after the decision to enter a new role. It not only influences the adoption of new goals but also plays a key role in the relevant characteristics that persons taken as role models possess or are believed to possess (attributes of role models); in how individuals construct personal identities, develop skills, and gain motivation towards existing objectives (outcomes of role modelling) (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015); and in the various ways in which individuals learn from and are influenced by role models (cognitive and emotional mechanisms of role modelling). Thus, exploring such underlying aspects of role modelling, beyond the initial decision to start a business, can expand our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour.

To address these gaps, we address the question of how the role modelling process unfolds for entrepreneurs throughout the start-up process. We implement a qualitative inductive methodology that combines a narrative approach with grounded theory. A narrative approach is a means of collecting and analysing the stories that people tell, paying particular attention to the temporal sequencing in which actions and events take place (Fletcher 2005; Gartner 2010; Polkinghorne 1988). Grounded theory complements the narrative approach by providing guidelines to systematically analyse information-rich descriptions, develop unresearched concepts, and establish relationships amongst them to generate emerging theory from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Our study of 25 entrepreneurs reveals three distinct narratives of role modelling: taking the leap, learning the trade, and soothing the nerves. They contribute an in-depth processual understanding of role modelling within an entrepreneurial context that stretches beyond the decision to become an entrepreneur.

Theoretical background

Role models are commonly described as people who reach exceptional achievements and motivate others in pursuing analogous success (Lockwood and Kunda 2000; Lockwood, Marshall, and Sadler 2005). Robert Merton introduced the term 'role model' in his development of reference group theory and defined it as an individual in a specific role whose behaviours serve as examples and are emulated by others who want to be in that specific role (Merton 1968). In sociology, roles describe typical behavioural patterns in social situations (Biddle 1986). Individuals fill various social roles (e.g. parent, spouse, son, citizen, friend, neighbour, and employee) and organize their behaviour differently depending on the expectations of the roles which are generally grouped into three broad categories: family, work, community (Havighurst 1973; Merton 1968). In this regard, individuals perceived as role models function as 'significant symbols' in that they stand for certain acts or desired situations that the perceiver finds meaningful (Mead 1932).

Role modeling in entrepreneurship research

Studies on role modelling in entrepreneurship draw heavily from Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1986) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Here, scholars examine the relationships between entrepreneurial role models and the choice of entrepreneurship as a career (Krueger 1993; Mungai and Velamuri 2011; Scherer et al. 1989; Van Auken, Fry, and Stephens 2006). These studies show how role modelling has a positive effect on entrepreneurial activity (e.g. Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007; Scherer et al. 1989). For example, building on career dynamics studies, Carroll and Mosakowski (1987) identify how self-employed parents increase the probability of people to enter self-employment. Consistently, subsequent studies indicate that role models boost entrepreneurial

activity both as the likelihood to become self-employed (Chlosta et al. 2012; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Mungai and Velamuri 2011) and to actively start a business (Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007; Vaillant and Lafuente 2007; White, Thornhill, and Hampson 2007). Accordingly, scholars examine antecedents of entrepreneurial activity and find that role models positively influence entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011; Chen, Ding, and Li 2016; Kolvereid 1996; Krueger 1993; Laviolette, Radu Lefebvre, and Brunel 2012; Radu and Loué 2008), increase preference for an entrepreneurial career (Scherer et al. 1989; Scott and Twomey 1988), encourage interest in business ownership (Matthews and Moser 1995; Van Auken, Fry, and Stephens 2006), and reduce fear of failure (Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016). In broadest terms, role modelling is considered to have a positive effect on entrepreneurial activity (e.g. Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007; Scherer et al. 1989).

In sum, existing studies examine role modelling as something that largely occurs at a single point in time, usually before the start-up, leading individuals to develop an entrepreneurial mindset (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011; Bosma et al. 2012; Krueger, Reilly, and Carsrud 2000; Scherer et al. 1989; Wyrwich, Stuetzer, and Sternberg 2016), and to create new businesses (Carroll and Mosakowski 1987; Mungai and Velamuri 2011; Vaillant and Lafuente 2007). As such, adopting a new goal, such as choosing entrepreneurship as a career, is the stage in the process of role modelling that dominates entrepreneurship literature (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015).

However, entrepreneurs also face different challenges *after* starting their business. These involve the execution of many tasks and fulfilment of various roles (e.g. developing product, recruiting employees, seeking funds; Davidsson and Honig 2003) for which role modelling facilitates the acquisition of skills and knowledge, the development of identities, and the reinforcement of motivation (Gibson 2004; Ibarra 1999; Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015). Indeed, some work has explored how entrepreneurs use role models as examples *after* they have created their business. For example, Bosma et al. (2012) show that role models also provide support to entrepreneurs in the post start-up phase (Bosma et al. 2012) and Zozimo et al. (2017) show that role models continue to provide opportunities to learn and develop knowledge and skills throughout the start-up process. While these studies illustrate the function role models played in supporting entrepreneurs after they started their business, there is still much to explore regarding deeper aspects of role modelling and how they unfold for entrepreneurs throughout the start-up process. We now turn to broader role modelling literature for further insight.

Insights from broader role modeling research

Much of contemporary role modelling literature stems from psychology research, where theoretical developments emphasize the subjective nature of role models and highlight the perspective of role aspirants, i.e. those individuals who emulate the role models (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015). Research on role modelling is applied to various contexts such as sport (Adriaanse and Crosswhite 2008; Bricheno and Thornton 2007; Mutter and Pawlowski 2014), education (Ainsworth 2010; Bagès and Martinot 2011; Cheryan et al. 2011), occupation (Almquist and Angrist 1971; Basow and Howe 1979; Carroll and Mosakowski 1987), and family (Hurd, Moore, and Rogers 1995; Nicholson, Howard, and Borkowski 2008). These studies typically focus on three main aspects of role modelling including the attributes of role models, the outcomes of role modelling, and the underlying mechanisms. Attributes of role models pertain to the relevant characteristics that persons taken as role models possess or are believed to possess. These can include levels of success, reasons for success, competence, sociability, and morality (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015). Research suggests that people rarely have one all-encompassing role model. Rather, they actively observe, adopt, and reject a selection of attributes from multiple persons (Bucher and Stelling 1977; Gibson 2004; Ibarra 1999).

The outcomes of role modelling pertain to what one admires as achievements to be emulated, thereby influencing the role aspirants' goals, skills, motivations, and identities. Many studies show that successful role models elicit emulation by representing the objectives that people desire and

commit to achieve (Bell 1970; Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015), such as a desired educational or career path (Basow and Howe 1979; Carroll and Mosakowski 1987; Dryler 1998; Shin, Levy, and London 2016). For example, studies in healthcare show that role modelling is an important process in the acquisition and development of technical and social skills in relation to the medical profession (Cruess, Cruess, and Steinert 2008; Essers, Van Weel-Baumgarten, and Bolhuis 2012; Kenny, Mann, and MacLeod 2003; Passi and Johnson 2016). Role modelling can also affect the motivation of individuals working towards existing goals such as in higher education where students are stimulated to study harder to keep up with assignments and achieve higher grades (Herrmann et al. 2016; Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002, 2005). Ultimately, role modelling has been found to affect personal identities such as in the case of medical students and managers that use role models to experiment attributes, values, beliefs, and motives to build their 'ideal self' (Ibarra 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006; Singh et al. 2006).

Finally, there are considerations of the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which role modelling occurs. These mechanisms encompass various ways in which individuals learn from and are influenced by role models. Reviews of existing studies on role modelling in educational and occupational contexts found five distinct mechanisms underpinning role modelling, including identification, social comparison, internalization, observational learning, and admiration (Gibson 2004; Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015). Underpinning these mechanisms, we see a range of ways in which individuals learn from and are influenced by role models, from imitating attractive qualities to evaluating oneself through comparison, internalizing beneficial values, learning through observation, and being motivated by admiration for exceptional accomplishments.

Drawing on these insights from the broader role modelling literature, we aim to deepen our understanding of role modelling as an ongoing developmental process for individual entrepreneurs. Conceiving process as a sequence of events, actions, and incidents that are essential to understanding how changes occur over time (McMullen and Dimov 2013; Van de Ven 1992), our study asks: How does the process of role modelling unfold for entrepreneurs throughout the start-up process? In particular, we are interested in exploring the attributes, outcomes, and mechanisms of role modelling for entrepreneurs throughout the start-up process.

Methodology

To answer these questions, our study combines narrative and grounded theory approaches. Narratives are situated, relational accounts that are socially constructed (Hosking and Hjorth 2004, 265) and contextualized to and by local-cultural-historical contexts (Gartner 2007). A narrative research approach is the study of these social phenomena through the collection and analysis of narrative materials including written literary works, diaries, or autobiographies, or oral data such as conversations and oral life stories obtained through interviews (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). At their most fundamental, narratives are simply the stories that people tell (Gartner 2007). Therefore, adopting a narrative research approach allows us to interpret past actions of research participants (Mantere et al. 2013) by paying particular attention to the temporal sequencing of interconnected events within their stories (Fletcher 2005; Gartner 2010; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998; Polkinghorne 1988).

Entrepreneurship scholars commonly adopt a narrative approach (J. Byrne, Fattoum, and Diaz Garcia 2019; O. Byrne and Shepherd 2015; Cruz, Hamilton, and Jack 2021; Gartner 2007, 2010; Garud and Giuliani 2013; Mantere et al. 2013), often in conjunction with other methods to delve into process dynamics (Alkhaled and Berglund 2018; Duncan and Pelly 2016; Montessori 2016). Entrepreneurial narratives are powerful tools to understand actions and emotions, as they capture the subjective sensemaking of entrepreneurs reflecting on their experiences (Gartner 2007, Downing 2005; Mitchell 1996). Such an approach highlights the temporal dimension and enables researchers to explore how entrepreneurs connect past, present, and future events, actions, and thoughts (McAdams 1999; McKenzie 2005; Polkinghorne 1988).

In addition, we use a grounded theory approach to systematically theorize our qualitative data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory is appropriate when the phenomenon being studied is unknown, concepts are poorly understood and conceptually undeveloped (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Therefore, through a narrative approach we examine the temporal sequences of role model attributes, role modelling outcomes, and events throughout the start-up process in order to capture the unfolding of role modelling narratives. In addition, through grounded theory we investigate in-depth and context specific attributes of role models and role modelling outcomes.

Sample and data collection

We take Czarniawska's (2004) assumption that an interview can become 'a micro-site for production of narratives' (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 51) and conducted interviews with entrepreneurs, who were in the process of initiating business ventures at the time the interviews took place. We focused on early-stage entrepreneurs using 42 months as threshold for the start-up process to reduce recall bias and avoid the influence of previous experiences on role modelling (Bandura 1986). We initially identified participants through a university incubator in the UK and further used snowballing to identify information-rich cases to seek variation in the data, discover new concepts and foster development of the emerging theory according to theoretical sampling (Patton 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1998). We continued this process until we began to see saturation in the data, and stopped at 25 participating entrepreneurs.

As shown in Table 1, the entrepreneurs came from different industries and sectors such as IT, clothing, online service, health and beauty, e-commerce, photography, automotive, and healthcare. While similar in age (age ranges from 19 to 26 with an average age of 22), participants came from ethnically diverse backgrounds and included 7 females and 18 males. Despite their background, each participant shared stories of at least two role models they drew upon throughout the start-up process. These included people in their closest social network such as parents, family members, friends and colleagues and managers from previous employment experiences. Role models also included more distant people with whom participants seldom or never interacted directly such as popular entrepreneurs (e.g. Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, Richard Branson, Bill Gates) and international entrepreneurs with high profiles (e.g. Amancio Ortega, Taj Lopez, Gary Vaynerchuck).

The goal of narrative interviewing is to enable participants to express their life experiences and facilitate understanding of their challenges from their perspective (Czarniawska, 2004). To achieve this, the first author conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to encourage the participants' storytelling and allow them to talk freely (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 2002). The interviews typically involved two main sections. Initially, we asked participants to share stories about themselves and their businesses including important events and challenges they encountered throughout the start-up process. We then asked participants to share stories about their role models, enquiring about who they identified as role models, why these people were significant to them, what they liked about that person/persons, what they learned from them and the implications this person had for them and their business. Each interview lasted between 40 and 120 minutes with an average duration of 47 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and produced 319 pages of transcription where participants shared their personal story, details of their past and present role models, and the impact these role models had on them throughout the start-up process. Following the grounded theory guidelines, we started to analyse data after the first interview. In this way, data collection was interwoven with data analysis and continued until saturation.

Data analysis

When analysing narrative accounts and narrative knowledge, the priority is to search for connections between various elements of a narrative as opposed to chains of causes and effects which is more

Table 1. Participants descriptions.

#	Name (Age, gender, country)	Business Idea	Notes on Role Models
1	Vasile (19, male, Romania)	Online travel planning service. Set up a website to provide automatically sourced content on popular destinations. Developed business plan for raising funds.	Vasile grew up observing his father and uncle managing a large construction company. He admires a renowned entrepreneur from his country for the passion and the ability to communicate. Further, he also appreciates two worldwide famous entrepreneurs for their ability to revolutionize established industries.
2	Beatrice (20, female, Spain)	B2B online service. Developed a business plan to build software to aggregate and provide data to local businesses. Lost a competition for fund raising and is currently improving the idea.	Beatrice was introduced to entrepreneurship by a fellow university student. Having spent three months working in a start-up, she appreciated the managerial skills and achievements of the managing director and her direct manager of the business.
3	George (20, male, England)	Online marketplace. Developed a platform to match temporary labour demand and offer. Received initial funds and currently working on legal issues to develop the idea.	George has grown up observing his self-employed father. He was later inspired by the outstanding successes of popular entrepreneurs that pioneered the computer industry. Additionally, he also looks up to two fellow members of the entrepreneurship society at his university.
4	Will (24, male, England)	Online travel portal. Developed an MVP allowing users to create bucket lists for travelling. He participated in various competitions for fund raising but eventually excluded. He is currently improving the service.	Will's early entrepreneurial interest was inspired by a young blog writer who accidentally became a prominent influencer in Silicon Valley. As a member of the local entrepreneurship society, he is encouraged by fellow members that already started their businesses.
5	Lukas (20, male, Lithuania)	Clothing. Designed an initial range of branded clothes for universities. Currently carrying out market research on customers and supplier sides.	Lukas has been deeply inspired by observing his father and his best friend's father entrepreneurial journeys, as a result he never considered any career path other than being self-employed. Recently, he has been reading the biography of a popular entrepreneur which he admires for his tenacity and resilience.
6	Omar (21, male, Saudi Arabia)	E-commerce. Launched an online store for independent coffee roasters and web magazine coffee-related contents. Started the business shortly before the second interview and not yet generating profit.	Omar has been motivated by the entrepreneurial ventures of his father. Lately, he has been inspired by the achievements and social commitments of two world-famous entrepreneurs. He wants to become a successful entrepreneur to then motivate and support young people in starting their own businesses.
7	Pablo (19, male, Spain)	Clothing. Designed and commercialized an initial range of products. The business is operating for a year and although profitable salaries are not payed to co-founders.	Pablo has been inspired by the entrepreneurial ventures within his family. His family has a long history of entrepreneurial ventures. His grandfather, father, mother and uncle have started a multitude of businesses in different industries. Pablo also admires the achievements of a famous entrepreneur who started various successful businesses.
8	Hannah (19, female, Northern Ireland)	Digital marketing. Had some freelance experience. Now looking for funds to start agency to manage the social media contents for small businesses.	Hannah's passion for technology and digital marketing originates by observing the computer businesses started within her family. Recently, she has been encouraged by the story of a female executive who became a prominent figure in the Silicon Valley.
9	Rob (24, male, England)	E-commerce. Launched a mobile application for online orders and payments to independent cafes and restaurants. Secured a first round of funding nine months ago. It is not generating profits.	The early inspiration occurred by observing his father develop a major project within a large corporation. Rob was further encouraged by reading about the successful entrepreneurial ventures of famous entrepreneurs in his country.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

#	Name (Age, gender, country)	Business Idea	Notes on Role Models
10	Joe (26, male, England)	Cloud storage. Developed a business plan for a mobile application allowing file sharing and cloud storage. Currently searching a business-savvy person to form a team and enter a business plan competition.	Joe was born and raised in an entrepreneurial family and he learned a great deal by observing and working with his self-employed parents. He was inspired by his late brother, who was raising charity funds through extreme sports. Joe admires a famous entrepreneur following his renewable resources vision.
11	Michael (19, male, England)	Personal development consulting. Started live courses to increase reading and memory skills. Currently seeking funds to develop mobile application.	Michael is an enthusiast fan of Tai Lopez, Gary Vaynerchuck, and Brandon Carter, famous entrepreneurs in the social media industry. He was initially caught by the luxurious lifestyles the entrepreneurs showed on social networks. He mastered his communication skills through watching daily videos released by the entrepreneurs. He was also encouraged by their ability to face obstacles throughout the entrepreneurial journey.
12	Dan (21, male, England)	Assistive technology. Currently developing glasses to aid visually impaired people. Prepared a business plan for fund raising to assemble a prototype.	Although growing up in entrepreneurial family, Dan never considered entrepreneurship until he met the CEO and founder of the company where he worked during a summer internship. He was inspired by knowing how a popular university drop-out turned a small business into a leading organization in the marketing industry.
13	Constance (20, female, France)	Health and beauty. Business idea of delivering boxes of cosmetics and hygiene products for women. Currently carrying out market research to develop the service.	Constance is a great fan of a world-wide famous entrepreneur and writer. She admires how he pioneered the digital marketing industry and extensively reads books and interviews about him.
14	Pete (23, male, UK)	Digital services B2B. Recently started a set of services to support small local shops and restaurants to create online shops.	Pete was a great fan of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs admiring their success and for how they changed the industry and the world with their companies. Pete is also encouraged by Bill Gates' failure with his early business Traf-O-Data and the entrepreneurial efforts of his father who quit a corporate job to start a business.
15	Susan (23, female, Singapore)	Health and beauty. Recently opened a beauty salon with a mission of increasing people's confidence in everyday life focusing in nail care.	Susan's family has a long entrepreneurial tradition. She has always been inspired by her grandparents running on of the most famous restaurants in her home country. She is also encouraged by her father moving to another country and start a hair salon.
16	Carlos (22, male, Spain)	Assistive technology. Currently developing a 'smart-badge' to aid employees in and out the workplace. Developed a business, currently seeking funds to build an MVP.	Since a teenager, Carlos have always been inspired by the success of famous entrepreneurs like Daniel Ek, Mark Zuckerberg and Travis Kalanick. Now, Carlos also admires one of friends that has recently started a business.
17	Aleksander (24, male, Bulgaria)	Online marketplace. Developed an online platform and mobile application to reduce food waste by connecting restaurants and supermarkets with potential customers willing buy nearly expired products. Started operations and received money from the government.	Aleksander truly admires Bill and Melinda Gates. He acknowledges they have been extremely successful entrepreneurs, but he mostly admires them for their philanthropic efforts. Aleksander also admires his father for his passion and for his ability to deal with the problems while managing his company.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

#	Name (Age, gender, country)	Business Idea	Notes on Role Models
18	Davide (25, male, Italia)	Photographer. Started as freelance photographer providing usual photography services. Currently designing a business model on photography education. Developing a portfolio of courses leveraging the need of students to socialize.	Davide developed an interest in photography as a teenager when, during a school trip, he visited an exhibition of Magnum Photos. He is a great fan of Steve McCurry and he is also inspired by the works of Robert Capa and Henry Cartier-Bresson. More recently, he is learning the managerial skills required to run his business by watching videos from Jamie Windsor, a photographer who is running YouTube channel with more than hundred thousand views daily.
19	Francois (21, male, France)	Automotive. Developed a business plan to produce a low-cost sports car. The objective of the company is to design and market a sports car with the price and running costs of small city car.	Francois has been inspired by Elon Musk entrepreneurial trajectory. Especially, he admires him for his vision about the future of the automotive industry and his tenacity in working towards his objective. Francois is also learning about the importance of communication skills in entrepreneurship having observed his older brother setting up an IT company.
20	Joseph (23, male, UK)	Sport equipment. Designed a mini scuba tank. Joseph is driven by a great passion for scuba diving and his aim is to make diving accessible for anyone who can swim. To do so he designed lightweight, refillable and portable air tank. Developed a business plan and currently searching for investment to start production.	Joseph has been introduced to scuba diving by his father. Since started diving, he has always admired Jacques Cousteau, a naval officer, explorer, filmmaker and inventor of the first modern breathing system for divers. Especially, he admires Jacques Cousteau for his entrepreneurial spirit in producing a popular documentary series about marine ecosystems. More recently, he is encouraged by his co-founder that previously started another business venture.
21	Sunita (25, female, UK)	Voice agency. Recently started a company providing a wide range of services to organization that needs international voices. The agency leverages the availability of international student in university campuses to provide voices in many languages with a 24/7 availability.	Sunita always had a passion for theatre and acting. She is a great fan of Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan. She believes he is one of the greatest Bollywood actors of all time and she appreciates that he is promoting Indian culture worldwide. More recently she has been inspired by knowing that Shah Rukh Khan started his own film production and distribution company. Following his example, she has been encouraged to start her own voice agency.
22	Rishi (22, male, UK)	Consumer privacy. Developed a business plan to produce a software that guarantees consumers' privacy in online purchases. The software will make use of blockchain technology to provide consumers with new anonymous identities for each transaction to be completed.	Rishi has been greatly inspired to pursue the entrepreneurial path by Elon Musk. He admires the many successful businesses Elon Musk has created. Rishi also learned the importance of being able to motivate the team by observing his former boss.
23	Joyce (22, female, South Korea)	Productivity software. Developed a very basic piece of software visually simulating an office environment. The software would support companies promoting smart working to increase employees' productivity. Developed an MVP and completed a business plan. Currently looking to raise investment to hire developers.	Joyce's interest for entrepreneurship was inspired by Mark Zuckerberg's experience in starting Facebook. She looks up to him because Mark achieved such a great success with a simple university project. Joyce is also motivated by the story of Alix HyeWon Park, a female entrepreneur from South Korea that has started a successful business in the marketing sector.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

#	Name (Age, gender, country)	Business Idea	Notes on Role Models
24	Sunny (24, female, China)	Clothing. The company has a buy-one give-one business model focusing on socks. The company designs and sells premium quality socks and donates a pair of socks to per each pair sold.	Sunny is a great fan of Blake Mycoskie. Sunny's entrepreneurial trajectory has been deeply inspired by Blake's commercial and social achievements with TOMS Shoes. She also looks up to Blake for becoming one of the most successful social entrepreneurs and she is encouraged a lot by his ability to deal with the criticisms faced by TOMS Shoes.
25	Cosmin (23, male, Romania)	Healthcare. Developed a business plan to build an online platform to facilitate doctor-patient appointments and long-distance medical screening. Data will be collected through an on-patient device and stored in company's servers for elaboration.	Grew up in a family with a long tradition of entrepreneurial ventures, Cosmin always wanted to start his company. As a child, he used to stay in his father's office and spend lot of time in his grandparents' shop. Observing the members of his family he learned a lot about how to deal with customers and the importance of knowing the customer base.

common with traditional logico-scientific knowledge (Czarniawska, 2004). In that vein, we analysed narrative material in two stages. First, we analysed each interview separately establishing role modelling narratives based on the stories of each entrepreneur. We examined the temporal references entrepreneurs made between their past events (experiences in early childhood, observations of parents or colleagues in previous business experiences, exposure to popular entrepreneurs) and thoughts and actions they made and decided to take in the present. Each of the entrepreneurs' collections of stories were analysed prioritizing internal consistency to understand the coherence of the narrative (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998).

To obtain a systematic data structure, we followed the analysis procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This involved open coding the interview transcripts, breaking them down into smaller fragments and attributing conceptual labels (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). At this stage, we used in-vivo codes looking for recurring words and phrases used by participants to prioritize their perspectives. To generate conceptual labels we identified words that represent interpreted meanings and enable grouping pieces of data with a common meaning (Corbin and Strauss 2014). We looked for and labelled raw data about attributes of role models, cognitive and emotional mechanisms of role modelling, and outcomes of role modelling. An example is the phrase 'built from scratch' that participants often used to describe role models as entrepreneurs who started with only ideas and consequently built new businesses by assembling resources. The in-vivo code 'built from scratch' led to the conceptual label 'growing attributes'.

We then progressed to axial coding and began reviewing and relating initial concepts to form higher order concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We began to form categories grouping related first order concepts to create more complex theoretical constructs. These categories represented significant phenomena and enabled us to reduce, combine, and integrate first order concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). For instance, the second-order concept 'growing and coping attributes' refers to the characteristics of role models that depict gradual development over time (growing) and effective handling of challenges (coping). Therefore, these constructs have various underlying dimensions. Growing attributes can describe the personal development of the role model as an entrepreneur or the business venture's organizational growth. Likewise, coping attributes can describe effective handling of difficulties in starting a business or the overcoming of challenges on the path to achieve success. Table 2 presents several examples for each second-order concept. The exemplary quotes illustrate the reduction of data from participants' words to more complex theoretical constructs.

Table 2. Quotes from Participants' Narratives and related 2nd Order Concepts.

Quotes from Participants' Narratives	2nd Order Concepts
• 'He is very entrepreneurial. He has his own business which is **rather small but it is successful. I mean . . . he is the breadwinner** and raised two kids, my brother and I . . . bought a house . . . these things'. (Int14-Pete)	**Success Attributes**
• 'I met one guy who studied for an MBA at Stanford. **So. he is big**. He studied arts and then he did an MBA. And he is also an environmental activist and he is involved in a lot of charity organizations. for orphans. And now he has his own consultancy business in communication. I really like him' (Int1-Vasile)	
• 'Elon Musk is a genius and **has launched so many successful businesses** that it is hard to believe he really did it. I mean. there are entrepreneurs working for their entire lives in their ventures. barely earning a living. And then there is Elon Musk who launched what? something like four or five multi-million dollars businesses! He started with PayPal which he sold for 165 million dollars and then went on with SpaceX, Tesla, The Boring Company. He is great. You would not believe it but yeah. it is all true!' (Int22-Rishi)	
• 'And **I do find him very inspiring**. . . I mean. . . he is a really big figure in the Silicon Valley. . . and we are almost the same age. I am also into tech stuff. So, I identify with him a lot. Because **I can see how I would start in a similar way. I could be him**. So, what I am doing at the moment is working out how I can build a simple newsletter really. Very inspiring'. (Int4-Will)	**Identifying with Role Models**
• 'Ehm. like as I said I have never met Bill Gates and Steve Jobs in person. obviously. but I had read a lot about them and. Of course and **it was fascinating**. reading what they did tech industry. **I identified with them a lot**. They enchanted me with this idea of having your business and change the world we live in. I mean they were great and **I just could myself doing the same**. I wanted to be like one of those people'. (Int14-Pete)	
• 'My father bought me a book about Jacques Cousteau. The Silent World. and that was the first time I met him. Love at first sight really. and then I started to watch his documentaries. **It is so amazing to see his inventions the aqualung and his ship**. They are kind of vintage. but you literally breathe his passion for what his doing. I used to watch the episodes and **see myself on that ship**. dreaming about being on his vessel with him. exploring exotic places and developing new instruments for scuba diver just like he did'. (Int20-Joseph)	
• 'Well, they got into this entrepreneurial mindset. I do find them very inspiring. I mean they are the stars in the Silicon Valley. And reading and listening about them. I just got inspired to do something similar. I look up at them and I just want to do the same. and **it looks so simple to create an app and start multimillion dollar company**'. (Int16-Carlos)	**Vocational Outcomes**
• 'I cannot say I have actually learned something from Bill and Melinda Gates. Because I did not get anything. I mean. but I admire what they did in charity. For sure they instilled in me the need to do my part in making this world a place. They have been a great source of inspiration because they are working tirelessly to make the world a better place. And following their example. **I just wanted to do my part in solving global challenges**.' (Int17-Aleksander)	
• 'my parents move to the UK when I was really young. so I did not spend much time with my grandparents. of course we often talked over the phone but I could not really observe them in the restaurant. So I think **it is more like inspiration. Yeah. They inspired me to do something great**. Because I used to hear stories about their wonderful restaurant. the atmosphere and their delicious food. So. I had been truly inspired to create a business that will make a difference. a business that will stand out'. (Int15-Susan)	
• 'The most challenging task I've faced is **establishing and nurturing relationships with collaborators and suppliers**. From the experiences of my father and uncle I know the importance of communication and building strong partnerships. Whether it's sourcing content from collaborators or negotiating services from suppliers, clear communication and trust are essential for success. It is not easy for me to talk to others as I get heated up quite fast'. (Int1-Vasile)	**New Entrepreneurial Tasks**
• 'Growing up in a family where we live and breathe business I was ready to it and I knew what to expect. Especially about the importance of customers relations and knowing your customer base. . . probably what caught me off guard was the complex **web of rules and regulations**. There are so many privacy concerns and the ethical implications of managing sensitive medical data of customers'. (Int25-Cosmin)	
• "Definitely coming up with sales forecast. Being an engineer with a tech background, handling the product design was within my comfort zone. But I don't know how much time I spent **when writing the business plan**. The meticulous gathering of information to estimate potential sales, revenues, and understand the competitive landscape. "(Int19-Francois)	

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Quotes from Participants' Narratives	2nd Order Concepts
• 'He is very calm and **he is so good in story-telling**. I mean communication skills are very important, not just for entrepreneurs but for everyone. Because at the end of the day how we interact with people? You talk to them. How are you going to sell them something? You need to communicate the story. You need to make that person understand why your product or service is good and why they should buy it. You need to have these skills. So, I look up to that'. (Int1-Vasile)	**Skills Attributes**
• 'I really like how **he was really accessible**. As in, if you see him in the street you would not know that he is such a successful CEO. Because he dresses completely normally and he speaks normally. He does not seems arrogant. He seems really accessible'. (Int13-Constance)	
• 'my dad.**is very entrepreneurial**. ehm not only in his business but in everything he does. I think he is a great entrepreneur . has a great passion and lots of skills. he has his own business for quite a few years now. And he has always been a source of inspiration for me'. (Int14-Pete)	
• 'And **it is all about the contrast between the two people**. I would have not looked up to my friend's dad if I did not have my dad. Because **it all is in the contrast**, and I know this is not useful but at least this is the way I understand it. Because my dad was very rough in managing his workers and only screamed at people. And then, I saw my friend's father in terms of how he managed people. He was amazing with other people'. (Int5-Lukas)	**Comparing with Role Models**
• '**He is so good in leading the team** and communicate with others. Especially those working with him. he just tells those people what they are expected to do and motivate them to achieve his vision. And you do not see this that often happening in SMEs. You know? When I was younger I have worked for my father. in his restaurant. And you could see he was talking to the staff. But then everyone was there just for the money and not really caring about the restaurant. **While with Philip**. the whole team was truly believing in the vision'. (Int22-Rishi)	
• '**Whereas Steve Jobs**. . . he was also amazing but **his organization was run on fear**. He used just to stare at people until like they. he just sussed them out and made them doing what he wanted to do. **While Ajaz Ahmed** he is actually a nice guy and **his organization was built on collaboration and cooperation**. Ajaz Ahmed made sure he meets every new person in the organization'. (Int12-Dan)	
• 'I think I do take the idea from my grandfather about a good customer service. For example, **trying to get to know the clients** I am working with, and knowing what is going on with their personal life. Just sort of understanding them as well'. (Int8-Hannah)	**Entrepreneurial Learning Outcomes**
• 'I've come to realize **the importance of delegation in managing my business**. It's not just about shouldering the burden alone. It's about growing and efficiency. Delegating tasks allows me to focus on what truly matters. I see this in my family's restaurant. . . for my grandfather is not a sign of weakness, but rather a tool. I leverage the strengths of my team'. (Int15-Susan)	
• 'So I think like. **being able to talk to different categories of people** by using their own language and trying to understand them it is very helpful. First of all it helps you to be respected, appreciated and trusted'. (Int1-Vasile)	

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Quotes from Participants' Narratives	2nd Order Concepts
• 'At first you need courage. People in general, right now, **are afraid to be entrepreneurs** because of this economic crisis and so on. Although you do not really need much money to start, you have to look after every cent. **It is very easy to fail**. [. . .] So, **I do not know Elon Musk's story personally**. But, if he managed to do what he has done, he must have a really strong drive and personality. And he is able to engage people in what he believes. **Therefore, I guess. I am guessing** that he is a really good leader and an entrepreneur. He is actually an entrepreneur. Even though he is the highest in his sector, **he started from nothing**. Okay, nothing is not the financial resources and the knowledge, But the company he created did not exist'. (Int7-Pablo)	**Fear-based Projections**
• 'I now have two years at university. So, I am not going into the unknown . Like, I am trying to start a business now but if it flops, I am still just at university. I do not need an income in the same respect as when I graduate. Then, if I cannot come up with ideas and make it happen, **how am I going to eat?** [. . .] What I admire about all of them is. . . **I think they took a step into the unknown**. Yeah. probably Ajaz Ahmed took the least step into the unknown. As he was already fiddling with ideas. **I cannot remember what he did** but he was already doing things. While Andy Puddicombe was doing the sports degree and he was just not very happy'. (Int12-Dan)	
• 'I am in my final year right now and everyone around me is getting a jobs. They are getting very good jobs in banks and all sort of firms. And they are getting paid a very good salary. And they are probably going to have a very good and decent life. And that's an amazing thing to go for. **Whilst I am saying no to employers and I am going to start my company**. And according to statistics, it is probably going to fail. I am not going to have a salary. **I do not know where my income is gonna be coming from**, you know? [. . .] Elon Musk is a billionaire and he has two companies in space exploration and car industry. And how did he materialize all that? **I think that comes from his long working hour**s and **his risk taking point of view**. I mean this guy, **I do not know if it is true** but I have heard that when he sold Paypal, he went to put all the profits from Paypal into Tesla, and from Tesla then into SpaceX'. (Int6-Omar)	
• 'So I think the first business role model I have is my uncle. He has a construction company but he worked so hard that he did not. In Romania, especially after the revolution they did not. we did not have any business. We did not have entrepreneurs because everything belonged to the government. So **he built it from scratch** and he had to teach himself all the business skills'. (Int1-Vasile)	**Growing and Coping Attributes**
• 'Amancio Ortega . . . he is from Spain. **He started selling bath towels in a little shop in the north of Spain. And now Zara is the top leading company in the world in the clothing sector**. This in the matter of thirty years. How did he manage to do this? Being able to think about what customers wanted. The products were of a really good quality and a good price. Being able to expand all the time. They do not invest that much in that advertisement. What they invest in it is just growth. They open a shop every day in the world. Every day, worldwide. For me it is just amazing. . . amazing'. (Int7-Pablo)	
• 'I think a businessman who also, a part from my father, kind of look up to is Elon Musk. Because, **I think he really defines taking risks**. I mean, he sold his company and then, he went to start a space exploration and a car company. Which is, by all means, some of the riskiest things to do. You know?' (Int6-Omar)	

Table 2. (Continued).

Quotes from Participants' Narratives	2nd Order Concepts
• 'My friend, he was a student. I met him at university. He studied Mathematics. He did a placement. He worked but he did not, he had some previous entrepreneurial experience that. everything he built, he built it himself without external help. And so, **I can see things from his perspective**. and I can see myself. Like, he was a student and **he did not receive external help** . So he only succeeded through trying and failing and learning and trying again'. (Int1-Vasile)	**Empathizing with Role Models**
• '**He literally started from almost nothing**. Ehm. so for me he was always an inspiring story. I think that's the reason why he is my role model. Also because **I can relate to him** you know? I can relate to him because he is. I have some of his genes and some of his traits and qualities. I used to see him working late and I knew when he was not feeling ok. And **for me, it is very easy to see my self in his shoes**. and it gives confidence I guess'. (Int5-Lukas)	
• 'Some people have done it. **To start a business and become successful at twenty years old**. And Ajaz Ahemd is really impressive and as he is from my same university... **you connect with him**. I can see what has been for him. Because he was there and I am there... at the same university. You know? So, it is so impressive and I really love what he has done. And I read all of his books. I love his company. **I think he was really burdened**. Obviously he does not regret it. And obviously the fact that he went to this university. I think it is incredible because it just feels like you could be him. You can be him .as I said before'. (Int13-Constance)	
• 'If you are passionate about your idea and you have strong support, I think that. **even if you have hard times, because you will have hard times**, but you can still manage in keeping motivated because you just have to see the big pictures in the end. The light at the end of the tunnel. Because **it is not like a terrible thing**. It is just a company. So if you. it is just money and if it is investors' money, it is fine. It is not even your money'. (Int13-Constance)	**Therapeutic Outcomes**
• 'I have spent time with my dad and you know ... it is telling me that **if you keep trying hard, you can achieve it**. That is probably the main thing I would say. Yeah, definitely. You know, business is difficult. There is a lot of things that have to come together at the same time for it to be a success. But I think **you need keep trying hard and keep going**. Then you should eventually find something that works'. (Int9-Rob)	
• '**it is reassuring ... Somehow**. Knowing that my father had created his business from an idea and he worked hard . . . day after day . . . to find new customers, searching for the best products. and best solutions for his customers. So, I think it helps a lot in terms of believing and it gives me confidence. It makes me believe that. sooner or later I will have my own business making enough money and having enough clients paying a subscription'. (Int14-Pete)	

In the second stage, we analysed narrative material engaging cross-case comparisons. We examined similar themes that emerged from the stories and identified patterns that emerged from their exposure to role models and the consequent thoughts and actions of entrepreneurs. As most of the themes emerged in each life story, we moved from 'within' story to 'cross' story analysis and identified a collective story of how role modelling unfolds for entrepreneurs as they engage in the startup process. This stage of analysis allows the understanding of the patterns of connection between various role modelling narratives. To assist cross-case comparison, we engaged in selective coding to generate overarching dimensions: the process through which all categories are brought together or integrated around a central or 'core' category (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We unified second order concepts that frequently recurred together into overarching dimensions that represented the recurring narratives of the role modelling process for entrepreneurs. To facilitate selective coding, we also organized concepts into a matrix in which columns are arranged chronologically according to 'Before Start-up' and 'During Start-up' phases (the two main time frames we identified for the start-up process), and rows display second order concepts pertaining to attributes of role models, role modelling mechanisms, and outcomes of role modelling. The final data structure is reported in Figure 1.
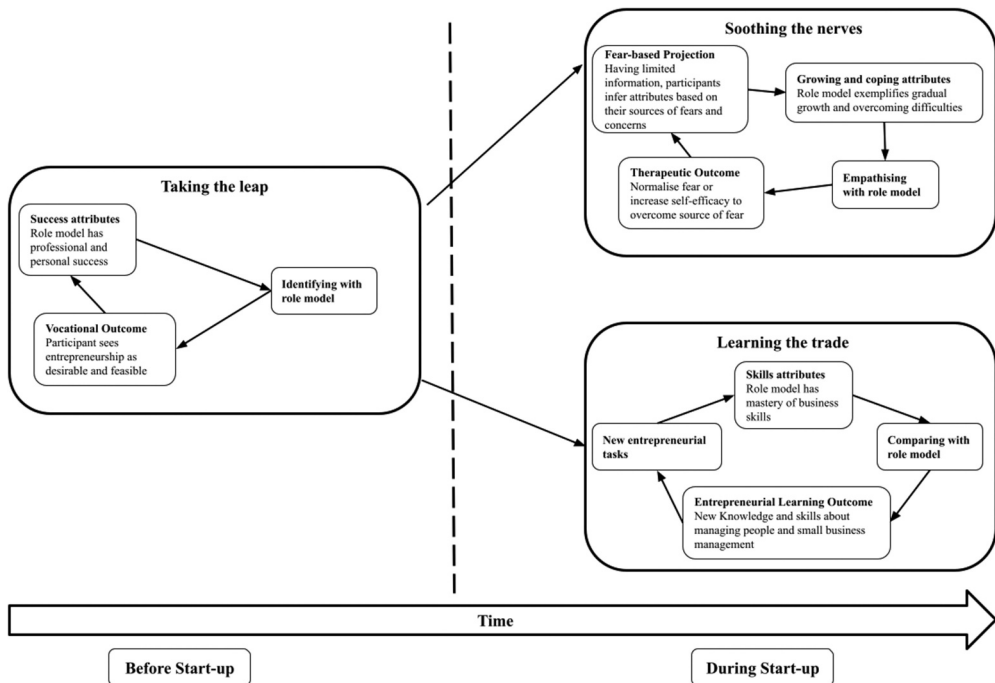
Figure 1. Data structure.

Figure 2. Role modelling narratives during the start-up.

Findings

Our research finds three role modelling narratives which take place before and during the start-up process. The first ('Taking the Leap') unfolds before participants actively engage in the start-up process. The second ('Learning the Trade') and third ('Soothing the Nerves') narratives both take place during the start-up process, when participants are actively pursuing activities related to the start-up of a new business. Each narrative describes the specific attributes of role models, the emotional and cognitive mechanisms underpinning role modelling, and the resultant outcomes for participants. Despite participants' diversity of ethnicity, background and gender, their narratives held similar accounts of role modelling. We present each of these narratives in the following sections. We discuss each narrative in turn.

Figure 2 illustrates how the three narratives fit into an overall model of the role modelling process, as it unfolds before and during the start-up process. This process model captures the broader theoretical understanding we have derived from our analysis. It shows how the role modelling dimensions – attributes, outcomes, and mechanisms – vary throughout the start-up process.

Taking the leap

> I bought Blake's book on Amazon 'Start something that matters' where he tells you the story behind TOMS and all the wealth and social value created. [. . .]Because I did relate to him in the sense I see myself doing something to help those less fortunate. (Int24-Sunny)

The *Taking the Leap* narrative involves role models characterized by success attributes. Participants identify themselves with their role models and, as a result, aim to obtain a vocational outcome. This narrative begins before start-up. Participants are often in childhood or teenage years when they observe more experienced entrepreneurs who achieved 'incredible' and 'fantastic' success in their entrepreneurial journey while also having a wealthy lifestyle and a good work-life balance. By

identifying with successful entrepreneurs, participants acquire an increased sense of suitability for an entrepreneurial career. As the role model displays these desired attributes, prospective entrepreneurs can see themselves achieving similar success and enjoying similar lifestyles. It is through identification with successful entrepreneurs, participants acquire a stronger desire to become entrepreneurs and a stronger sense that they can achieve similar results in their entrepreneurial career.

These early exposures are likely accidental and unplanned with participants reporting family members (interestingly all male), such as fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers, among their early role models. For example, Lukas recalls that he 'was just a kid' when he realizes the success of his father on a ski holiday:

> It was not anything fancy. We just rented an apartment. My sister, my mum and dad, we just went skiing in Austria. It was not anything super special. But for me was just like "Oh! Okay! So this is why he works so hard. So we can go out and see the world". But this is like, you know, for a kid. So it is not business related. That was success for a kid. For me, this is what success is' (Int5-Lukas).

In contrast, Francois explains that as a teenager he read books and was inspired by popular entrepreneurs instead of family members:

> Reflecting on my past, I was looking up to the successful people in the tech industry. I listened to the news about them and admired their achievements. Like Elon Musk taking over the board of Tesla investing 8 million dollars in 2004 (Int21-Francois).

Early exposures can also be accidental and unintended. As Michael recounts, he is surfing the web when he accidentally watches a video of a popular entrepreneur and is immediately attracted by the luxurious lifestyle:

> So a few years back I was searching for speed-reading courses on Youtube and found a video of Taj Lopez. So I was like who is this guy? Who is the opposite to me? But yeah, there is a lot of value he gives (Int11-Michael).

Success attributes

In the Taking the Leap narrative, participants admire role models who display attributes of success in their professional and personal lives. Success attributes pertaining to the professional domain exemplify entrepreneurial success with various stepping stones in their entrepreneurial journeys such as having: built market-ready products, achieved market leadership, had company ownership, earned high profits, created social value, and had social recognition. For example, George explains his admiration for two older students in his university by explaining that they were successful in creating a mobile application and starting a business: that

> … Both of them have been successful in starting the businesses and making a product that looks like an app. And you can see that in your hand. So you can download one. I do not think you can download the other actually, but it is coming. It is just to see someone who has created something really. It is cool. (Int3-George).

Another feature of success attributes is how participants link the achievements of role models to material entities. Participants materialize the personal and professional success of their entrepreneurial role models with the actual products of the businesses and with the goods the role models could afford. This objectification is evident in Lukas' interview when he recognizes the entrepreneurial success of his father who owns one of the leading construction companies in the whole country. Lukas explains that it is easy for him to understand the success of his father because the buildings erected by the companies are tangible and can be observed around the city. As Lukas narrates,

> It is one of the largest construction companies in the country. Top 3 or top 2. It depends on how you measure success, no? In terms of company size, I think it has been a very successful business. He has done some. I do not know, with a construction business it is very easy to measure success because it is tangible. You can see it. You can drive around the city and see that this is the building. They did this building and did this other building. So you can also measure the outcome of the business, not only the business itself. (Int5-Lukas).

With success attributes, participants also admire role models who exemplify successful personal lifestyles such as wealthy living, work-life balance, educational achievements, and philanthropic accomplishments. For example, Beatrice admires her boss because he works on his 'cool start-up' and spends quality time with friends:

> He can just do a lot of stuff. He is not only working on his cool startup but he has got other works. He is doing some consulting for other companies during the weekends, and at the same time he spends quality time with his friends. He just seems to balance everything in the right way (Int2-Beatrice).

Identifying with role models

These narratives also express a crucial psychological process for role modelling: identification. In the Taking the leap narrative, participants recount successful experienced entrepreneurs explaining that those role models lead to seeing entrepreneurship in a more feasible and desirable way. This implies that when participants identify with their role models, they were prompted by an initial similarity and placed themselves in the situations of more experienced entrepreneurs. Participants who identify with role models, initially recognize a desired goal or quality (such as wealth, fame, successful product), temporarily imagine themselves as having the goal and quality or in the circumstances of the role models and, eventually express a desire to emulate their role models. Identification with a role model is well described by Carlos who identifies with Mark Zuckerberg. Carlos initially defines Mark Zuckerberg as the '*most popular*' entrepreneur because of the widespread use of Facebook. Carlos then continues by explaining that, while reading Mark Zuckerberg's biography, he '*lost himself in him*' and imagines himself doing what Zuckerberg was doing in his company. Hence, Carlos concludes by judging this connection as '*inspirational*' and discloses his wish to emulate Mark Zuckerberg (Int16-Carlos).

> Yes, definitely, especially books and interviews. I have been reading an incredible amount of material on them especially about Mark Zuckerberg. obviously he is the most popular. you know everyone daily uses facebook. And when I read about him and what he has been doing for facebook I simply see myself doing what he did. Sometimes when reading his biography. I just lost myself in him. he was like a fictional character and I could see me doing what he was doing in his company. Truly inspirational because you want to do the same. (Int 16 – Carlos)

Vocational outcome

In the Taking the Leap narrative, the observation of experienced entrepreneurs with professional and personal success leads participants to develop a desire to become entrepreneurs and a strong belief that they can achieve similar accomplishments in their own entrepreneurial ventures. The vocational outcome describes an acquired sense of suitability for the entrepreneurial career that emerged from the underlying concepts of desirability of entrepreneurial career and feasibility of entrepreneurial career. This is well described in the cases of Dan and Michael and many others when, after learning about the companies created by Ajaz Ahmed, Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Tai Lopez, they start to learn more about the role models fascinated by the intelligence, independence, and business successes and describe the willingness to '*start doing something*' (Int25-Cosmin), to '*roll my sleeves up*' (Int21-Sunita) and to '*be like them*' (Int-9-Rob). Other participants, after observing successful entrepreneurs acquire an increased perceived feasibility of entrepreneurship and begin to believe that they can achieve successes analogous to that of role models. For example, as Beatrice explains after pondering upon how many activities her boss can do, '*he makes it seem like everything is so easy*' (Int2-Beatrice). Similarly, George read about the famous entrepreneurs as a kid and argues '*you look at them and at what they have achieved*', thus, it is by seeing himself having a similar trajectory that he stated that '*you feel like you can set up your own business and disrupt the industry*' (Int3-George).

Learning the trade

> But it was not just a matter of understanding how to motivate your team. I have worked with Philip for almost a year and I have had the chance to observe him in many occasions. The way he talked. very assertive and gentle but having always a clear objective in mind. Oh gosh. These were skills I did not really have back then. but I have observed him and now. I can take those lessons and use them in my business. God knows how many gems I have got from him. like when I had to negotiate the price for a server or just simply present the business plan to investors. (Int22-Rishi)

The *Learning the Trade* narrative unfolds as participants are in the process of starting their business and encounter new entrepreneurial tasks. Role models feature skills attributes and participants compare themselves or others entrepreneurs with skilful role models highlighting skills, knowledge and insights useful in their future entrepreneurial trajectories. Overall, this narrative describes the acquisition of different entrepreneurial learning outcomes, including learning about oneself, learning about one's own business, learning about small business management, and learning about relationships, that the research participants received from their role models. As Hannah describes, she spent much of her childhood with her grandfather observing how he relates and treats clients:

> As I was growing up I spent at least three days a week at my grandparents' house. And we will be having dinner and some of my grandad's customers would phone over the dinner. And he always complained about it but you could tell that it was his life. Now that he is retired and he just does not have his business anymore, I know he misses it. You know? He jokes about it but he kind of misses it. We were just having dinner and he would get up and take the phone. He would know everyone by first name and he would know about their families. He just knew all his customers personally, and he would always talk to thems. (Int8-Hannah).

This role modelling narrative displays a temporal complexity which involves reference to events which occurred before as well as during the start-up process.

New entrepreneurial tasks

Following the vocational outcome produced by successful role models, participants start to act on their business ideas. Throughout the interviews, participants describe engaging in a variety of activities including market research (Int13-Constance), developing the business plan (Int16-Carlos, Int19-Francois, Int10-Joe), developing the product (Int10-Joe, Int18-Davide), searching for investors and funds (Int23-Joyce, Int20-Joseph), dealing with legal issues (Int15-Susan, Int25-Cosmin), and establishing relationships with suppliers and collaborators (Int1-Vasile). These entrepreneurial tasks reflect the diverse array of activities and roles fulfilled during the startup process. However, amidst the many responsibilities, it becomes evident that cultivating social relationships with the different actors involved in the start-up (partners, suppliers, investors, customers) emerges as a critical new entrepreneurial task for participants. This is well described by Davide. As he transitions from freelance photography to start a business that provides photography courses, he highlights the complexity of developing social relationships with customers:

> Crafting a business model centered around photography education has demanded a shift in perspective. Shooting at people getting married is about creativity and technical aspects while now I am dealing with other customers, there is a need for a different communication and marketing and building solid relationships. Initially, I believed it was mainly about creating courses and delivering a learning experience, but there's so much more to it. Every detail demands careful consideration; it all needs to fall into place. (Int18-Davide)

Skills attributes

In this narrative, participants admired role models who displayed a strong mastery of skills associated with different entrepreneurial tasks. For example, participants described role models as having skills related to business management, including the capacity to efficiently organize the daily operations of the start-up (Int5-Lukas), the ability to manage financial resources to achieve long-term growth (Int10-Joe), the capacity to manage risk by owning different companies at the same time (Int5-Lukas),

and the ability to identify profitable opportunities by analysing available information (Int1-Vasile). Participants also admired role models for their skills in effectively relating to other people, such as: the ability to communicate to various types of audiences (Int1-Vasile), the ability to take care of the employees by providing a relaxed working environment (Int2-Beatrice), the ability to build relationships with potential business partners (Int5-Lukas), and the ability to deal with customers by listening to their personal needs (Int8-Hannah).

These mastery skills are functional to achieving the entrepreneurial and personal successes that we saw in the 'Taking the Leap' narrative. For example, Joe admired Steve Jobs who founded Apple, and considered him to be one of the leaders in Silicon Valley, for his ability in managing financial resources. As Joe explains

> For the first twenty years Apple was a startup. A twenty year old company is not really a startup. But Steve Jobs saw that and he was pushing it forward through reinvesting and reinvesting. So the company was in crisis all the time but it was not. It was amassing huge profits. But he was reinvesting it and never paid a dividend. He never paid a dividend to any shareholder which pissed a lot of people off. So that is how you get innovation. That is how you get that far. (Int10–Joe)

Comparing with role models

In the 'Learning the Trade' role modelling narrative, social comparison emerges as a crucial mechanism facilitating participants to learn from role models. With this narrative, participants compare the skills attributes of role models with situations in which the skills are not present. Participants repeatedly match desirable attributes of role models (skills perceived to be beneficial to business management or socially accepted qualities) to undesirable attributes of others (lack of skills or qualities perceived as harmful to the business). For example, Dan's insight on the ability to build a rapport with people inside the business emerges from the comparison of his role model, Ajaz Ahmed, with another famous entrepreneur: Steve Jobs. During an internship at the company funded by Ajaz Ahmed, Dan observed the founder and CEO and describes him as

> A nice guy and his organisation was built on collaboration and cooperation' while recalling Steve Jobs as an 'absolutely bad lad' because, as Dan explained, 'his [Steve Jobs] organisation was run on fear. He just used to stare at people until like they . . . he just sussed them out and made them doing what he wanted to do. (Int12-Dan)

Elsewhere, Lukas compares his experience observing his friends' father's style of management which contrasted greatly with his own father's way of managing his employees:

> And it is all about the contrast between the two people. I would have not looked up to my friend's dad if I did not have my dad. Because it all is in the contrast, and I know this is not useful but at least this is the way I understand it. Because my dad was very rough in managing his workers and only screamed at people. And then, I saw my friend's father in terms of how he managed people. He was amazing with other people. So I thought that I can actually have a business and also do this way, and be nice with the employees. And that is much more related to my personality, to what I am. (Int 5 – Lukas)

Entrepreneurial learning outcome

By observing the role models managing their businesses, participants acquire knowledge, skills, and beliefs that they could apply to their own entrepreneurial journeys, such as effective management of new business ventures and the management of people connected to their business. For example, Rishi learns the importance of human skills by observing Philip, his former boss and founder of a small IT company. It was by working closely with his former boss and observing him managing employees, that Rishi learned about the importance of '*managing your team'* which includes

> Communicate with them and make you sure they have clear goals and the motivation to achieve the goals and to motivate the team and inspire each single member to reach the common goal. (Int22-Rishi)

Similarly, it is during the internship in a small start-up that Beatrice has the opportunity to observe the founder. She is impressed by how he deals with challenges that daily arise in the company. From this, Beatrice recognizes that

> The attitude that to a problem follows an action it is really good for the business and for work. It helps everyone in the business and makes sure that everything is working in the right direction. (Int2-Beatrice)

By observing behaviours, strategies, and experiences of role models, participants also acquire knowledge and insights related to distinctive situations of the small business context such as dealing with investors (Int10-Joe), managing employees (Int5-Lukas, Int12-Dan), dealing with customers (Int8-Hannah) and importance of domain-specific knowledge (Int1-Vasile).

Soothing the nerves

> But what I get from them, from me connecting with them, is that I apply their lessons to my daily life. I connect with them whenever I am faced with some sort of rejection or setback. I would ask myself: what did Tai Lopes do?. (Int 11 – Michael)

The *Soothing the Nerves* narrative pertained to when participants were in the process of starting their businesses and involve participants empathizing with role models who gradually built companies or who effectively overcame obstacles. With Soothing the Nerves, participants describe role models who displayed a gradual growth to success and who effectively coped with adversities during their entrepreneurial journeys. A central theme of the Soothing the Nerves narrative is the reduction of fears and concerns related to starting a business. As participants engage with the start-up activities, they face challenges and difficulties common in the business creation process. These obstacles pose serious threats to firm survival and cause fears and concerns to entrepreneurs. In their narratives, participants describe challenges such as a lack of financial resources (Int1-Vasile, Int3-George, Int8-Hannah), disappointing customers (Int11-Michael, Int23-Joyce), and taking responsibilities (Int10-Joe). As Michael describes when approaching the launch of his new online service

> It was scary when. . . what if it fails? What if, you know these pounds I have invested. . . I do not make anything back? Oh Jesus. Because you become attached to it. You put your time, you put your money and then? (Int11-Michael).

Fear-based projection

Different from attributes of success and mastery of skills in the Taking the Leap and Learning the Trade narratives, growing and coping attributes sometimes are the result of mental projections based on participants' own concerns and fears. Throughout the interviews, participants describe fears and concerns related to the start-up including lack of financial resources (Int1-Vasile), uncertainty of income and the opportunity costs of turning down well-paid jobs (Int6-Omar), business failure (Int7-Pablo), and gender discrimination (Int8-Hannah).

Scarce information about role models facilitates the projections of growing and coping attributes. While some participants know in detail the perils of their role models because of the close proximity (family, friends, work) or through the use of social media (videoblogs of YouTube, posts on Instagram and Facebook), others do not. When participants lack access to information about the role models' stories, they deduce growing and coping attributes. Participants acknowledge not having enough information because the role model is a distant and popular entrepreneur whose personal life is not easily accessible (Int12-Dan), or because although they have bought the role model's autobiography, the book has not yet been read (Int7-Pablo), or more simply the participants' exposure to role models happened many years ago and the details are not clearly remembered (Int5-Lukas).

However, they conjecture that their role models, having attained such remarkable success, must have experienced gradual growth towards their achievements, adeptly managed initial resource constraints and entrepreneurial risks, and had the courage to venture into the unknown. Hence,

participants project attributes onto other entrepreneurs that directly match their own fears and concerns. The fear-based projecting of coping attributes can be found in Hannah's narrative about Cheryl Sandberg becoming a woman leader in the IT industry:

> Ehm. I am not sure. but at some point in her career she most likely was discriminated. I mean, I do not know her life so well. But I presume that she was. Because unfortunately the IT was a male-dominated industry. That is just what the tech community used to be. And in some places it still is. Ehm. but I just think her mentality and her experience is really really impressive and inspirational definitely. (Int8-Hannah)

Growing and coping attributes

In contrast to the Taking the Leap narrative, participants admire role models, not for their outstanding success or their incredible mastery, rather because these role models have managed to establish their businesses from the ground up and adeptly navigated through various difficulties. Specifically, the Soothing the Nerves narratives display two types of attributes: growing attributes, which portray gradual progression to conditions of success; and coping attributes, which refer to how role models effectively overcome obstacles in the entrepreneurial journey. These attributes establish substantive and temporal connections between different stages of the role models' and/or their businesses' development. They prominently emerge from the data, as participants frequently share succinct anecdotes employing phrases like '*from*' and '*to*', or '*now*' and '*then*'.

With growing attributes, in describing the personal development of the role model as an entrepreneur, participants describe how their role models have changed from the outset of the entrepreneurial journey to their actual status of experienced entrepreneurs owning and managing established businesses. For example, Omar admires his own father, describing him as starting from a 'very poor background' without access to education to eventually becoming one of the most important consultants in the country (Int6-Omar). Similarly, Michael admires Gary Vaynerchuck, an entrepreneur who founded a software company and owns several media companies. Michael describes how his role model started selling baseball cards as a teenager and consequently developed his family business:

> You know, a russian immigrant who sold baseball cards when he was thirteen. And he was earning money selling baseball cards. Worked for his dad's wine company for three pounds an hour. So you can imagine. And he talks about how fucked up he was about that. Grew the business within three years to get his dad's company from like three millions to like sixty millions within three years. (Int11-Michael)

The growing attributes of entrepreneurial role models also portray the gradual growth of the business ventures. Participants describe the growth of their role models' businesses by beginning with an initial phase in which the organization does not exist. Many participants describe this by explaining that the businesses were 'built from scratch'. This is clear when Pablo describes his father's entrepreneurial journey: '*what I mean with creating this from scratch it is not, he did not have the money to do it. But instead, the idea did not exist [. . .] He created it by himself*' (Int6-Pablo).

The participants' narratives consequently describe business growth as progressing to the point where the organizations become successful and the role model entrepreneurs become leaders in their sectors. Within the data, participants describe the development of the organization, the role models are portrayed as protagonists that envisioned the growth and used their skills to materialize their plans. For example, Pablo describes another role model Amancio Ortega, Spanish entrepreneur and founder of Zara; Pablo argued that

> He started selling bath towels in a little shop in the North of Spain. And now Zara is the top leading company in the world in the clothing sector. This in the matter of thirty years. How did he manage to do this? Being able to think about what customers wanted. (Int6-Pablo)

In terms of coping attributes, participants describe their role models including events and situations perceived as obstacles in the entrepreneurial journey of the role models. Hence, the participants admire the more experienced role model entrepreneurs for having effectively overcome these

obstacles. In describing the way role models make their way through the start of the business, participants refer to unfavourable conditions inherent to the creation of new businesses, such as scarce resources and uncertainty. George admires his friends, not just because they had created a real product, but also for having secured the funding needed to start their business by remaining in their hometown:

> Because my previous perception was that you needed to be in London to raise investment because that's where all the money is. They both proved that to be wrong. They have raised investment here! In our town. (Int3-George)

Empathizing with role models

Whether the growing and coping attributes of role models result from participants' prolonged exposure to them or are projections based on their own fears and concerns, participants empathize with role models having growing and coping attributes. When participants empathize with role models, they describe active efforts to appreciate what role models went through in their entrepreneurial journeys, developing an understanding of perspective, feelings, and needs of the other entrepreneurs. Yet, participants empathize with their role models even when the process attributes are learned through prolonged direct exposure. Particularly, participants appear to 'relate' to their role models and imagine how they felt when they had to cope with difficulties. For example, as Susan points out when talking about her father, participants attempt to 'connect' with the role models and understand what they went through when starting their business by imaging what could have been done in similar circumstances.

> Well yes my grandparents are in Singapore. and it is easier with my father because he is here and I am here. . . So for me it is normal to see him at work. I have actually worked for him, you know? as a receptionist during weekends. But it is more like. I have lived with my father and I know what he had to do to keep going. . . and now for me it is easy to see myself going through the same path. Start a beauty salon, put my energy and passion to nurture it .and of course deal with all the problems along the way. (Int15-Susan)

The Soothing the Nerves narrative contains references to the participants' emotional and cognitive bonds towards their role models. Many participants report a sense of close connection using words such as '*I can relate to him you know?*' (Int5-Lukas), '*you connect with him . . .* ' (Int13-Constance), '*see myself*' (Int1-Vasile; Int15-Susan; Int17-Aleksander). The participants recognize an 'undesirable attribute', such as a negative emotion or difficult situation experienced by the role model (disappointment, stress, demotivation, lack of resources to start the business) and consequently make an active effort to appreciate what the role model went through both emotionally and cognitively when experiencing distressing and challenging circumstances in their entrepreneurial trajectories.

For example, Vasile highlights that his role model encountered challenges while attempting to secure the necessary funds for launching his restaurant. Vasile recounts the role model's numerous unsuccessful fundraising endeavours. Consequently, Vasile posits that there likely came a moment when his role model experienced significant disappointment and a barrage of rejections from potential investors, prompting contemplation of abandoning his entrepreneurial ambitions.

> I now expect the same disappointment with any of the problems that I will have to work with in order to achieve my objective. For him, it was finding a place. For me, it will be, for example, finding the funding. Like that is the biggest disappointment for all the entrepreneurs. Like. . . but also for him was not easy to find the money. How many times did he pitch and did not raise enough funds? He must have been so disappointed. (Int1-Vasile)

Therapeutic outcome

The Soothing the Nerves narrative includes a therapeutic outcome whereby role model entrepreneurs reduce the fears and concerns that arise for participants as they progress in the start-up process. Exposure to role models who gradually grew their businesses and who effectively coped with adversities in their entrepreneurial endeavours make participants normalize their own fears and

concerns and strengthen the belief that they will be able to overcome the sources of their difficulties and obstacles. By developing an empathetic bond with role models who experienced the difficulties emblematic of the entrepreneurial process (i.e. struggling in raising funds, experienced business failure, being on the verge of bankruptcy), participants obtain a therapeutic outcome because they could '*now expect the same disappointment with any of the problems*' (Int1-Vasile) they would encounter and, as Pablo explained, '*if something goes bad, it is not the worst thing*'. Further, looking towards growing and coping role models led the participants to believe that they themselves could effectively cope with similar obstacles. As Vasile argues about his uncle . . . '*knowing that he started from the ground and looking where he is now . . . I know it is possible to start with nothing and have so much*'.

In the Soothing the Nerves narrative, entrepreneurs report two different types of therapeutic outcomes. From one side, fears and concerns related to future and potential threats diminish through a normalization of the sources of fears and concern. 'Normalising sources of fears and concerns' involves entrepreneurs acknowledging that the undesirable circumstances they feared were experienced also by their role models. This is clearly illustrated by Constance as she looks up to Ajaz Ahmed, British entrepreneur and founder of AKQA. Acknowledging that Ajaz's entrepreneurial career was not easy, Constance argues that she is not afraid of failure because she believes in the potential of her idea and her ability to manage the business explaining that

> Well, he [Ajaz Ahmed] had an idea and he went for it even though it was hard. . . and everyday he loves his job. So, just like not being afraid if you are going to fail. (Int13-Constance)

Differently, fears and concerns caused by specific conditions perceived as obstacles diminish through an increased self-efficacy that entrepreneurs would cope with the sources of fears and concerns. Through the exposure to role models, participants believe that they themselves are able to overcome obstacles, as their role models did. For example, it is by reflecting upon his father's entrepreneurial trajectory as he

> Built a huge company from not having any business plan and not having any money, that Lukas concludes that he can do it. . . even if you do not have all the money in the world and all the requisites for success (Int5-Lukas).

This concludes the findings and our presentation of the three role modelling narratives. We next discuss these findings and provide both theoretical and practical implications from the study, before highlighting limitations to the work and avenues for future research.

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature a deeper understanding of role modelling as an ongoing developmental process that unfolds throughout the start-up process. The theoretical insights from our work are captured in Figure 2, which illustrates the role modelling process before and during the start-up process. It highlights that role modelling unfolds in three distinct narratives: taking the leap, learning the trade, and soothing the nerves. Within each of these narratives, the attributes, outcomes, and mechanisms of role modelling vary throughout the start-up process.

The first theoretical contribution of this study lies in providing a nuanced view of the attributes, outcomes, and cognitive and emotional mechanisms of role modelling throughout the start-up process. Beginning with attributes, current work focuses on success, arguing that entrepreneurial role models are considered for their perceived or actual economic performance in entrepreneurship and for their lifestyle resulting from their business (Mungai and Velamuri 2011; Scherer et al. 1989; Van Auken, Fry, and Stephens 2006). These studies highlight how entrepreneurs with bigger and more successful companies and wealthy lifestyles exert greater influence on young individuals (Dunn and Holtz-Eakin 2000; Hundley 2006; Mungai and Velamuri 2011; Van Auken, Fry, and Stephens 2006). Our results extend these descriptions, highlighting that entrepreneurs look for role models who gradually grow and struggle against

adversities to achieve their success. This implies that the attributes of role models related to outstanding success (Taking the Leap) give way to skills attributes describing how role models achieve their success (Learning the Trade). In addition, when participants manage fears and concerns associated with starting a business, they seek growing and coping attributes (Soothing the Nerves).

These findings extend research on entrepreneurial role model attributes by highlighting that instead of being a static fixed state, attributes are dynamic and context bound. This is comparable to career dynamics literature on attributes of role models (Gibson 2003) and extends Zozimo et al. (2017) and Bosma et al. (2012) by showing how attributes are subject to change and how role models evolve into intricate and diversified figures to align with the developmental requirements and roles of entrepreneurs at different stages of the start-up process.

Our second contribution lies in distinguishing vocational and therapeutic outcomes of role modelling. While prior research emphasizes that observing significant others can make individuals more likely to become entrepreneurs (Chlosta et al. 2012; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Lafuente, Vaillant, and Rialp 2007), we highlight what happens following this decision. Once an entrepreneur engages in start-up activities and tasks, vocational outcomes are broken down to entrepreneurial learning outcomes which are professionally based in terms of wanting to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the start-up tasks and manage a business (Learning the Trade). This substantiates the ideas of the developmental effect of role models, leading to the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and knowledge (e.g.: Bosma et al. 2012; Zozimo et al. 2017). In addition, we find therapeutic outcomes which are more personally and emotionally driven as they deal with wanting and needing to normalize and overcome fear (Soothing the Nerves).

More broadly, our findings highlight the importance of both task and emotion driven outcomes of role modelling. Previous research shows that role models reduce entrepreneurial fear of failure before the start-up (BarNir, Watson, and Hutchins 2011). We find that role models, who initially motivate individuals to undertake the entrepreneurial journey with their outstanding successes, are brought forward throughout the start-up process as a source of knowledge and emotional support. Therefore, we extend this work by showing that fears of failure persist throughout the start-up process and role models reduce such fears. In this way, we also expand on Zozimo et al. (2017) and Bosma et al. (2012) by showing in-depth the nature of the support role models provide during the start-up and reinforce the complex nature of failure (Cacciotti and Hayton 2015).

Lastly, our study highlights the cognitive and emotional processing through which role modelling occurs throughout the start-up process. Beyond mere identification with role models, our participants also engaged in comparison and projection-empathization. As entrepreneurs immerse themselves in the start-up process, they compare skilful role models with others such as popular entrepreneurs, closer known entrepreneurs, or also oneself. While social comparison effects are well established in the context of higher education in regard to the motivation of students to study harder and keep up with assignments (Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002; Lockwood, Marshall, and Sadler 2005), they are not common in entrepreneurial role modelling literature.

In regard to projection-empathization, in order to manage their fears, participants actively projected growing and coping attributes onto their role models – despite not actually knowing these details for certain. Through the consequent empathizing with such attributes, participants normalized their fears or increased their confidence to overcome difficulties. This finding substantiates a growing interest in empathy in entrepreneurship (Shepherd, Seyb and Williams 2023), in that a vicarious mental simulation of another's experience could produce similar emotions but also similar experiential knowledge (Packard and Burnham 2021). Our work moves beyond the use of empathy in the context of understanding consumer demand. We find that entrepreneurs use empathy to assist with and overcome their own fears – in some ways problem solving their own problems as opposed to other people's problems. More broadly, we bring attention to projecting-empathizing as an important psychological mechanism of role modelling. It is by imagining their role

models in such difficult and fearful circumstances that entrepreneurs reduce, or at least control, their own anxieties.

Implications for practice

This study holds implications for practitioners and educators. Firstly, we encourage nascent entrepreneurs to actively seek diverse role models. Each of these role models can provide different types of support at various stages of the startup process. While popular entrepreneurs can serve as inspiration, family members or friends who have started and gradually grown small businesses can offer valuable learning opportunities and sustain motivation in the later stages of the startup process, especially when facing difficulties. Secondly, we encourage entrepreneurs to consider their public narratives and to speak publicly about not only their successes, but also their challenges, fears, and how they overcame them. Making this information available can inspire and support future generations of entrepreneurs and assist with overcoming challenges and fears that prospective and early-stage entrepreneurs may be experiencing.

Finally, for entrepreneurship educators, we suggest a dynamic approach to using guest speakers into their curricula. Given that nascent entrepreneurs seek various attributes in role models, from exceptional success to resilience against adversities, we urge educators to invite speakers reflecting a diverse range of qualities. Additionally, our study advocates for the inclusion of empathy within entrepreneurship curricula, not only to foster networking and team-building, but also to facilitate learning from other entrepreneurs, particularly during emotionally challenging phases of the startup process.

Avenues for future research

Our study has limitations, which open up areas for potential research. First, while our study focuses on nascent and novice entrepreneurs, we know from organizational research that role modelling functions differently for junior and senior employees (Gibson 2003). Future studies could explore the effect of prior business experience on role modelling by examining how role modelling narratives differ for novice and serial entrepreneurs. Second, given our inability to access a gender-balanced group of respondents, future studies could pay greater attention to gender, by intensifying efforts to recruit female participants. Third, our study uses retrospective accounts. Even though such accounts provide valid and meaningful material to understand learning (Cope 2011), they are sensible to recall bias and distortion (Chandler and Lyon 2001; Podsakoff and Organ 1986). Future studies can employ longitudinal designs and follow nascent entrepreneurs as they progress in the start-up process and collect data on role models as they transform ideas into established businesses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study builds on the growing consensus that role models have wide positive effects on entrepreneurial activity and extends entrepreneurship literature by identifying different role modelling narratives throughout the start-up. Through personal identification and social comparison, aspirant entrepreneurs become attracted to starting a new business and acquire relevant skills and knowledge. After the start-up, as they engage the various gestation activities, the entrepreneurs describe role models that exemplify a gradual growth to more modest success and that along their journey have coped against adversities. Through empathizing and projection, entrepreneurs reduce their fears and concerns as they progress in the start-up. Lastly, our study highlights how complex the role modelling process is, especially when entrepreneurs are actively running their businesses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Adriaanse, J. A., and J. J. Crosswhite. 2008. "David or Mia? The Influence of Gender on Adolescent girls' Choice of Sport Role Models." *Women's Studies International Forum* 31 (5): 383–389. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2008.08.008.

Ainsworth, J. W. 2010. "Does the Race of Neighborhood Role Models Matter? Collective Socialization Effects on Educational Achievement." *Urban Education* 45 (4): 401–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085910372346.

Ajzen, I. 1991. "The Theory of Planned Behavior." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50 (2): 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T.

Alkhaled, S., and K. Berglund. 2018. "'And Now I'm free': Women's Empowerment and Emancipation Through Entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia and Sweden." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 30 (7–8): 877–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2018.1500645.

Almquist, E. M., and S. S. Angrist. 1971. "Role Model Influences on College women's Career Aspirations." *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development* 17 (3): 263–279.

Bagès, C., and D. Martinot. 2011. "What Is the Best Model for Girls and Boys Faced with a Standardized Mathematics Evaluation Situation: A Hardworking Role Model or a Gifted Role Model?" *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50 (3): 536–543. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02017.x.

Bandura, A. 1986. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

BarNir, A., W. E. Watson, and H. M. Hutchins. 2011. "Mediation and Moderated Mediation in the Relationship Among Role Models, Self-Efficacy, Entrepreneurial Career Intention, and Gender." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 41 (2): 270–297. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00713.x.

Basow, S. A., and K. G. Howe. 1979. "Model Influence on Career Choices of College Students." *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly* 27 (3): 239–243. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-585X.1979.tb00991.x.

Bell, A. P. 1970. "Role Modelship and Interaction in Adolescence and Young Adulthood." *Developmental Psychology* 2 (1): 123. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0028613.

Biddle, B. J. 1986. "Recent Developments in Role Theory." *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1): 67–92. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.12.080186.000435.

Bosma, N., J. Hessels, V. Schutjens, M. V. Praag, and I. Verheul. 2012. "Entrepreneurship and Role Models." *Journal of Economic Psychology* 33 (2): 410–424. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2011.03.004.

Bricheno, P., and M. Thornton. 2007. "Role Model: Hero or Champion? Children's Views About Role Models." *Educational Research* 49 (4): 383–396. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131880701717230.

Bucher, R., and J. G. Stelling. 1977. *Becoming Professional*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Byrne, J., S. Fattoum, and M. C. Diaz Garcia. 2019. "Role Models and Women Entrepreneurs: Entrepreneurial Superwoman Has Her Say." *Journal of Small Business Management* 57 (1): 154–184. https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12426.

Byrne, O., and D. A. Shepherd. 2015. "Different Strokes for Different Folks: Entrepreneurial Narratives of Emotion, Cognition, and Making Sense of Business Failure." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 39 (2): 375–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12046.

Cacciotti, G., and J. C. Hayton. 2015. "Fear and Entrepreneurship: A Review and Research Agenda." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17 (2): 165–190. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12052.

Carroll, G. R., and E. Mosakowski. 1987. "The Career Dynamics of Self-Employment." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32 (4): 570–589. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392884.

Chandler, G. N., and D. W. Lyon. 2001. "Issues of Research Design and Construct Measurement in Entrepreneurship Research: The Past Decade." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 25 (4): 101–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/104225870102500407.

Chen, N., G. Ding, and W. Li. 2016. "Do Negative Role Models Increase Entrepreneurial Intentions? The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 38 (6): 337–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2016.1217223.

Cheryan, S., J. O. Siy, M. Vichayapai, B. J. Drury, and S. Kim. 2011. "Do Female and Male Role Models Who Embody STEM Stereotypes Hinder women's Anticipated Success in STEM?" *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2 (6): 656–664. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611405218.

Chlosta, S., H. Patzelt, S. Klein, and C. Dormann. 2012. "Parental Role Models and the Decision to Become Self-Employed: The Moderating Effect of Personality." *Small Business Economics* 38 (1): 121–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-010-9270-y.

Cope, J. 2011. "Entrepreneurial Learning from Failure: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis." *Journal of Business Venturing* 26 (6): 604–623. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2010.06.002.

Corbin, J., and A. Strauss. 2014. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.

Cruess, S. R., R. L. Cruess, and Y. Steinert. 2008. "Role Modelling—Making the Most of a Powerful Teaching Strategy." *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 336 (7646): 718–721. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39503.757847.BE.

Cruz, A. D., E. Hamilton, and S. L. Jack. 2021. "Autoethnography in Qualitative Studies of Gender and Organization: A Focus on Women Successors in Family Businesses." In *Handbook of Research Methods on Gender and Management*, edited by V. Stead, C. Elliot, and S. Mavin, 38–55. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Czarniawska, B. 2004. *Narratives in Social Science Research*. New York, NY: Sage Publications.

Davidsson, P., and B. Honig. 2003. "The Role of Social and Human Capital Among Nascent Entrepreneurs." *Journal of Business Venturing* 18 (3): 301–331. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026(02)00097-6.

Downing, S. 2005. "The Social Construction of Entrepreneurship: Narrative and Dramatic Processes in the Coproduction of Organizations and Identities." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 29 (2): 185–204.

Dryler, H. 1998. "Parental Role Models, Gender and Educational Choice." *The British Journal of Sociology* 49 (3): 375–398. https://doi.org/10.2307/591389.

Duncan, M., and R. Pelly. 2016. "A bureaucrat's Journey from Technocrat to Entrepreneur Through the Creation of Adhocracies." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 28 (7–8): 487–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2016.1221226.

Dunn, T., and D. Holtz-Eakin. 2000. "Financial Capital, Human Capital, and the Transition to Self-Employment: Evidence from Intergenerational Links." *Journal of Labor Economics* 18 (2): 282–305. https://doi.org/10.1086/209959.

Easterby-Smith, M., R. Thorpe, and A. Lowe. 2002. *Management Research: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication Ltd.

Essers, G., E. Van Weel-Baumgarten, and S. Bolhuis. 2012. "Mixed Messages in Learning Communication Skills? Students Comparing Role Model Behaviour in Clerkships with Formal Training." *Medical Teacher* 34 (10): e659–e665. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.687483.

Fletcher, D. 2005. "Book Review: Narrative and Discursive Approaches in Entrepreneurship: A Second Movements in Entrepreneurship Book." *International Small Business Journal* 23 (5): 569–571. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242605055912.

Gartner, W. B. 2007. "Entrepreneurial Narrative and a Science of the Imagination." *Journal of Business Venturing* 22 (5): 613–627. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2006.10.003.

Gartner, W. B. 2010. "Entrepreneurial Narrative Theory Ethnomethodology and Reflexivity: An Issue About the Republic of Tea."

Garud, R., and A. P. Giuliani. 2013. "A Narrative Perspective on Entrepreneurial Opportunities." *Academy of Management Review* 38 (1): 157–160. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0055.

Gibson, D. E. 2003. "Developing the Professional Self-Concept: Role Model Construals in Early, Middle, and Late Career Stages." *Organization Science* 14 (5): 591–610. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.14.5.591.16767.

Gibson, D. E. 2004. "Role Models in Career Development: New Directions for Theory and Research." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 65 (1): 134–156. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0001-8791(03)00051-4.

Havighurst, R. J. 1973. "Social Roles, Work, Leisure, and Education."

Hermanns, J. M., and P. E. De Winther. 1971. "Observational Learning and Imitation: A Developmental Study." *Anthropology & Medicine* 19 (2): 95–108.

Herrmann, S. D., R. M. Adelman, J. E. Bodford, O. Graudejus, M. A. Okun, and V. S. Y. Kwan. 2016. "The Effects of a Female Role Model on Academic Performance and Persistence of Women in STEM Courses." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 38 (5): 258–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2016.1209757.

Hoffmann, A., M. Junge, and N. Malchow-Møller. 2015. "Running in the Family: Parental Role Models in Entrepreneurship." *Small Business Economics* 44 (1): 79–104. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-014-9586-0.

Hosking, D. M., and D. Hjorth. 2004. "Relational Constructionism and Entrepreneurship: Some Key Notes." In *Narrative and Discursive Approaches in Entrepreneurship*, edited by D. Hjorth, and C. Steyaert. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Hundley, G. 2006. "Family Background and the Propensity for Self-Employment." *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy & Society* 45 (3): 377–392. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-232X.2006.00429.x.

Hurd, E. P., C. Moore, and R. Rogers. 1995. "Quiet Success: Parenting Strengths Among African Americans." *Families in Society* 76 (7): 434–443. https://doi.org/10.1177/104438949507600705.

Ibarra, H. 1999. "Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (4): 764–791. https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055.

Kenny, N. P., K. V. Mann, and H. MacLeod. 2003. "Role Modeling in physicians' Professional Formation: Reconsidering an Essential but Untapped Educational Strategy." *Academic Medicine* 78 (12): 1203–1210. https://doi.org/10.1097/00001888-200312000-00002.

Kolvereid, L. 1996. "Prediction of Employment Status Choice Intentions." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 21 (1): 47–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/104225879602100104.

Krueger, N. 1993. "The Impact of Prior Entrepreneurial Exposure on Perceptions of New Venture Feasibility and Desirability." *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* 18 (1): 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/104225879301800101.

Krueger, N., M. Reilly, and A. Carsrud. 2000. "Competing Models of Entrepreneurial Intentions." *Journal of Business Venturing* 15 (5): 411–432. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9026(98)00033-0.

Lafuente, E., Y. Vaillant, and J. Rialp. 2007. "Regional Differences in the Influence of Role Models: Comparing the Entrepreneurial Process of Rural Catalonia." *Regional Studies* 41 (6): 779–796. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400601120247.

Laviolette, E. M., M. Radu Lefebvre, and O. Brunel. 2012. "The Impact of Story Bound Entrepreneurial Role Models on Self-Efficacy and Entrepreneurial Intention." *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research* 18 (6): 720–742. https://doi.org/10.1108/13552551211268148.

Lieblich, A., R. Tuval-Mashiach, and T. Zilber. 1998. *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lockwood, P., C. H. Jordan, and Z. Kunda. 2002. "Motivation by Positive or Negative Role Models: Regulatory Focus Determines Who Will Best Inspire Us." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83 (4): 854. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.4.854.

Lockwood, P., and Z. Kunda. 2000. "Outstanding Role Models: Do They Inspire or Demoralize Us?" In *Psychological Perspectives on Self and Identity*, edited by A. Tesser, R. B. Felson, and J. M. Suls, 147–171. Wasington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Lockwood, P., T. C. Marshall, and P. Sadler. 2005. "Promoting Success or Preventing Failure: Cultural Differences in Motivation by Positive and Negative Role Models." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31 (3): 379–392. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271598.

Mantere, S., P. Aula, H. Schildt, and E. Vaara. 2013. "Narrative Attributions of Entrepreneurial Failure." *Journal of Business Venturing* 28 (4): 459–473. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2012.12.001.

Matthews, C. H., and S. B. Moser. 1995. "Family Background and Gender: Implications for Interest in Small Firm Ownership." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 7:365–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985629500000023.

McAdams, D. P. 1999. "Personal Narratives and the Life Story." In *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Practice*, edited by L. A. Pervin and O. P. John, 478–500. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

McKenzie, B. 2005. "Collecting Oral Histories for Entrepreneurship Research." *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship* 8 (1): 37–48. https://doi.org/10.1108/NEJE-08-01-2005-B004.

McMullen, J. S., and D. Dimov. 2013. "Time and the Entrepreneurial Journey: The Problems and Promise of Studying Entrepreneurship as a Process." *Journal of Management Studies* 50 (8): 1481–1512. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12049.

Mead, G. H. 1932. *The Philosophy of the Present*. Amherst, NY: Prometeus Books.

Merton, R. K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Miles, M. B., A. M. Huberman, and J. Saldaña. 2014. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mitchell, R. K. 1996. "Oral History and Expert Scripts: Demystifying the Entrepreneurial Experience." *Journal of Management History* 2 (3): 50–67. https://doi.org/10.1108/13552529610127696.

Montessori N. M. 2016. "A theoretical and methodological approach to social entrepreneurship as world-making and emancipation: social change as a projection in space and time." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 28 (7–8): 536–562. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2016.1221229.

Morgenroth, T., M. K. Ryan, and K. Peters. 2015. "The Motivational Theory of Role Modeling: How Role Models Influence Role aspirants' Goals." *Review of General Psychology* 19 (4): 465. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000059.

Mungai, E., and S. R. Velamuri. 2011. "Parental Entrepreneurial Role Model Influence on Male Offspring: Is it Always Positive and When Does it Occur?" *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice* 35 (2): 337–357. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2009.00363.x.

Mutter, F., and T. Pawlowski. 2014. "Role Models in Sports–Can Success in Professional Sports Increase the Demand for Amateur Sport Participation?" *Sport Management Review* 17 (3): 324–336. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.07.003 .

Nicholson, J. S., K. S. Howard, and J. G. Borkowski. 2008. "Mental Models for Parenting: Correlates of Metaparenting Among Fathers of Young Children." *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, & Practice About Men As Fathers* 6 (1): 39–61. https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0601.39.

Packard, M. D., and T. A. Burnham. 2021. "Do We Understand Each Other? Toward a Simulated Empathy Theory for Entrepreneurship." *Journal of Business Venturing* 36 (1): 106076. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2020.106076.

Passi, V., and N. Johnson. 2016. "The Hidden Process of Positive Doctor Role Modelling." *Medical Teacher* 38 (7): 700–707. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2015.1087482.

Patton, M. Q. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, inc.

Podsakoff, P. M., and D. W. Organ. 1986. "Self-Reports in Organizational Research: Problems and Prospects." *Journal of Management* 12 (4): 531–544. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920638601200408.

Polkinghorne, D. E. 1988. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Pratt, M. G., K. W. Rockmann, and J. B. Kaufmann. 2006. "Constructing Professional Identity: The Role of Work and Identity Learning Cycles in the Customization of Identity Among Medical Residents." *Academy of Management Journal* 49 (2): 235–262. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2006.20786060.

Radu, M., and C. Loué. 2008. "Motivational Impact of Role Models As Moderated by "Ideal" Vs. "Ought Self-guides" Identifications." *Journal of Enterprising Culture* 16 (4): 441–465. https://doi.org/10.1142/S0218495808000223.

Scherer, R. F., J. S. Adams, S. S. Carley, and F. A. Wiebe. 1989. "Role Model Performance Effects on Development of Entrepreneurial Career Preference." *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice* 13 (3): 53–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/104225878901300306.

Scott, M., and D. Twomey. 1988. "The Long-Term Supply of Entrepreneurs: Student's Career Aspirations in Relation to Entrepreneurship." *Journal of Small Business Management* 26 (4): 37–44. https://www.proquest.com/openview/590381ebda7a94c65a5ffc70cf59a935/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=49244.

Shepherd, D. A., S. Seyb, and T. A. Williams. 2023. "Empathy-Driven Entrepreneurial Action: Well-Being Outcomes for Entrepreneurs and Target Beneficiaries." *Journal of Business Venturing* 38 (2): 106290. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2023.106290.

Shin, J. E. L., S. R. Levy, and B. London. 2016. "Effects of Role Model Exposure on STEM and Non-STEM Student Engagement." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 46 (7): 410–427. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12371.

Singh, V., S. Vinnicombe, K. James, and R. J. Burke. 2006. "Constructing a Professional Identity: How Young Female Managers Use Role Models." *Women in Management Review* 21 (1): 67–81. https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420610643420.

Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: Sage.

Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Procedures and Techniques for Developing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.

Vaillant, Y., and E. Lafuente. 2007. "Do Different Institutional Frameworks Condition the Influence of Local Fear of Failure and Entrepreneurial Examples Over Entrepreneurial Activity?" *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 19 (4): 313–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985620701440007.

Van Auken, H., F. L. Fry, and P. Stephens. 2006. "The Influence of Role Models on Entrepreneurial Intentions." *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship* 11 (2): 157–167. https://doi.org/10.1142/S1084946706000349.

Van de Ven, A. H. 1992. "Suggestions for Studying Strategy Process: A Research Note." *Strategic Management Journal* 13 (5): 169–188. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250131013.

White, R. E., S. Thornhill, and E. Hampson. 2007. "A Biosocial Model of Entrepreneurship: The Combined Effects of Nurture and Nature." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 28 (4): 451–466. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.432.

Wyrwich, M., M. Stuetzer, and R. Sternberg. 2016. "Entrepreneurial Role Models, Fear of Failure, and Institutional Approval of Entrepreneurship: A Tale of Two Regions." *Small Business Economics* 46 (1): 467–492. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-015-9695-4.

Zozimo, R., S. Jack, and E. Hamilton. 2017. "Entrepreneurial Learning from Observing Role Models." *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 29 (9–10): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2017.1376518.