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[doi.org/10.34074/scop.6003004](https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6003004)

THE PHENOMENON OF THE WORKING AROUND ENTREPRENEUR  
THROUGH COVID-19 IN NEW ZEALAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of  
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# THE PHENOMENON OF THE WORKING AROUND ENTREPRENEUR THROUGH COVID-19 IN NEW ZEALAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

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## THE PROBLEM: THE FAILURE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP

My personal experiences as an entrepreneur and a practitioner have led me to suspect that the high failure rate in entrepreneurship (Bushe, 2019; Dias & Teixeira, 2017; Mansfield, 2019; Raiz, 2019), is linked to ineffective entrepreneurial leadership. Entrepreneurial leadership, as a discipline, is a relatively new style of leadership recognised in academic research. In the entrepreneurial context, all entrepreneurs need to be leaders (Leitch & Volery, 2017). My practitioner experience as both an entrepreneurial trainer and a student leader trainer suggested that the journey of leadership learning should begin in early high school through an intervention to lay a foundation for self-awareness and self-leadership. With this hunch, I entered the academic sphere by enrolling for a Doctor of Professional Practice with the aim to better prepare future entrepreneurial leaders earlier in their education. The notion that ideas for both quantitative and qualitative research projects begin with a hunch is well recognised in literature on research methodology (Moon, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

Pragmatism, which “directs us to seek practical and useful answers that can solve, or at least provide direction in addressing concrete answers” (Patton, 2015, p. 152), provided a unique philosophical world-view for this study. The mixed methods research design followed four phases, culminating in the fifth phase with the proposition of a new theory of leadership preparation, through a grounded theory progression.

Action research functioned as an overarching method to identify, plan, act and reflect to solve the problems identified in this study (Dickens & Watkins, 1999). Figure 1 provides an overview of the two action research cycles of the study.

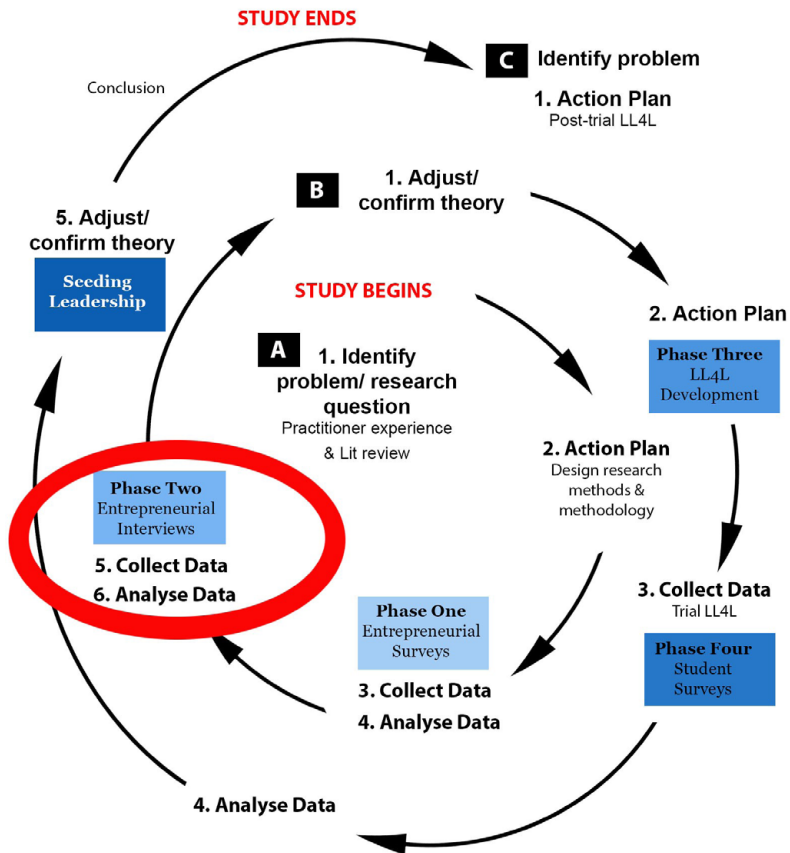


Figure 1. Overview of the full action research process of this study. The red circle indicates Phase Two, to which this article relates (Source: Author).

Phase One (at A.3 and A.4) used a quantitative data collection and analysis method, to identify sources of positive influence on currently successful entrepreneurial leaders, using an online anonymous survey. Phase Two used qualitative data collection to deepen insights from Phase One with 10 participants from New Zealand and 10 from South Africa. Phase Three planned to integrate the sources of positive influence identified into an intervention workshop for first year high school students and Phase Four planned to trial the intervention workshop within eight participating schools in New Zealand and South Africa.

This article focusses on two patterns that emerged from the findings of Phase Two, using a phenomenological lens of enquiry that asserts that phenomena exist only within a certain context (Patton, 2015). Phenomenology entails gaining data from a group of participants, with the aim of “painting a picture” from their lived experience of the phenomenon under study (Bolderston, 2012). Their thoughts, ideas and perceptions provided data for this discussion around successful entrepreneurial leadership through COVID-19 (Bolderston, 2012). The two patterns identified, named the adversity thriver pattern and the entrepreneur’s identity crisis, uncovered the authentic nature of the working around entrepreneur during the COVID-19 crisis. There were no notable differences between the New Zealand and the South African participants with regards to the two patterns discussed here.

## The impact of COVID-19 on the research design

The arrival of COVID-19 in March 2020 had an impact on my research, my practice and my two businesses. My data gathering now needed to happen mostly on-line. I had to apply for ethical approval to conduct interviews via video platforms such as Zoom. A pioneering, if relatively small, study found that researchers' and participants' general satisfaction with the Zoom platform indicated its suitability as a qualitative data collection tool, (Archibald et al., 2019). Within the context of the pandemic, I was a working around COVID-19 entrepreneur, researching with other working around COVID-19 entrepreneurs to gain insights into their success drivers.

## Interview participants

Twenty entrepreneurs participated in one-on-one interviews between 8 October 2020 and 25 March 2021. Ten were from New Zealand and 10 from South Africa to align with the geographical locations covered by my professional practice. There were four female and 16 male participants across several cultural backgrounds including representation from White European, Black African, Asian and Māori ethnicities. Their ages ranged from 23 to 64. From March 2020, all participants had led, and were continuing to lead, their businesses through lockdowns. Hence, COVID-19 provided a new definition (Bolderston, 2012) for the term "currently successful" by adding the participation requirement of "successful through COVID-19 so far."

## FINDINGS

### Pattern one: The adversity thriver pattern

When the interviews started, I had been navigating through the COVID-19 crisis for six months myself as an entrepreneurial leader. I asked all the participants to share their lived experiences of how they had first responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Whilst not in the immediate scope of my research focus, this question provided rich insights into successful entrepreneurial leadership. I was interested in their reactions to realising that the crisis was real, was going to impact their businesses dramatically and had come without warning. The majority described their response to the realisation of the seriousness of COVID-19 as immediately taking action. This action was largely focused on making their staff and clients feel safe from the effects of the crisis. Many described days of video calls to facilitate this. For many, keeping their staff employed meant obtaining loans to cover payrolls, either from other businesses or from formal lending institutions. Whilst businesses in New Zealand were promised government assistance, this was not guaranteed and the immediate response of New Zealand entrepreneurs did rely on this assistance. These loans were all personally committed to by these leaders, with no more inside knowledge about what the COVID-19 pandemic would entail, than any of their staff members. They automatically assumed all risk and responsibility for the anticipated effects brought about by COVID-19. As an entrepreneur, I realised upon reflection that both my business partner and I had responded in a similar manner to these participants. This revealed a backwards confirmation of researcher bias (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003), where I realised something about myself only after seeing it consistently in others.

### Personal values as an influence

I was curious to find out what was driving such a response. I searched previous research on entrepreneurial leadership for clues, starting with personal values. Could the response they described be related to each entrepreneur's personal or professional set of values? Steven Hitlin (2003) argued that an individual adopts a certain value because it reflects their true self that is already intrinsically there at birth. He concluded that core values are unique to an individual in ways that group and role identities are not. Shalom Schwartz (2012) noted that values play an important role in the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and groups. He pointed

to a universal organisation of human motivations using values. However, the relative importance of values differ between individuals and societies. Whilst values are adopted, they are re-ordered within each individual, suggesting that certain common values could have been present in these participants. This was taken into consideration but could not practically be measured during the interviews.

### **Innate leadership traits as an influence**

The next question was if these entrepreneurs were born leaders who naturally responded this way. There is an ongoing debate in leadership studies as to whether leaders are born or made (Brungardt, 1996; Gladwell, 2009; Murphy & Reichard, 2012; Rosch et al., 2015). In their study, Johnson et al. (1998) traced the origins of scientific thought on heritable leadership traits to Galton, who in 1869, conducted a study on the pedigree of one hundred individuals considered to be great men. Since this greatness prevailed in their family history, it was believed that greatness was hereditary. However, despite many studies attempting to align certain traits with successful entrepreneurship (Caliendo & Kritikos, 2011; D'Intino et al., 2007; Jain & Ali, 2013; Kolb & Wagner, 2015; Neck & Greene, 2011; Obschonka et al., 2015), successful entrepreneurship could not be associated with specific traits (Gartner, 1985; Neck & Greene, 2011).

Leitch and Volery (2017) discussed entrepreneurial leadership through different ontological approaches (the reality for an entrepreneur) using both positivist and interpretive methodologies. They recognised a shift from the pioneer researcher focus (identifying a successful person with specific personality traits and attempting to categorise and define entrepreneurial leadership) towards the understanding that being an entrepreneur requires one to be a leader. This new understanding suggests that entrepreneurial leadership evolves through the process of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial leadership are intertwined. The findings from this study concurred that entrepreneurial leadership is a distinct form of leadership, different to leadership theories developed through corporate, military and educational structures (Dinham, 2007; Hannah et al., 2009; Karp & Helgø, 2009; Northouse, 2015).

### **Childhood experiences as an influence**

If entrepreneurship naturally leads to entrepreneurial leadership, what drives an individual into entrepreneurship in the first place? I found that all participants who reflected the adversity thriver pattern had developed a significant sense of inner strength, personal responsibility, and a sense of duty to take care of others during their formative years. These seemed to have been founded in adversity. In most cases, they experienced difficult or traumatic childhoods. These experiences included absent parents, emotionally unavailable parents, no parents (or father/mother figure), alcoholic parents, abusive parents, negligent parents, parents at war, sexual abuse and two cases of extreme childhood illnesses. At some point during their development in an environment which left them vulnerable and lonely, they realised that they could rely only on themselves. "If it's going to be, it's up to me" came through frequently in the interviews through words or sentiment. What stood out to me was that this was not a survival response but a "thrival" response, where they experienced deep personal growth from their experiences. What might have broken others, had served, in these individuals, to ignite a powerful inner force.

Many were able to pinpoint the age when this personal growth happened and it ranged from four to twelve (I was eight) – when they were just kids. The Aldridge Foundation, a British educational charity, founded in 2006, that focuses on creating social change through enterprise and entrepreneurship, found that seven out of ten entrepreneurs cited traumatic childhoods as the reason for their business success (Shuman, 2015). This pattern was also present in autobiographies of entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk (Vance, 2016) and Steve Jobs (Isaacson & Jobs, 2015). In her autobiography, Mariah Carey captures and verbalises it best from my perspective. I reviewed her autobiography, not from the perspective of her music, but from her entrepreneurial spirit, which is strongly evidenced by her success as a business leader. She recounts at the age of 50 that she wrote her story for her

younger 4-year-old self. A 4-year-old self trapped between racial denominations, within a family divided and at war. "I understood on a soul level that no matter what happened to me, or around me, something lived inside of me that I could always call on. I had something to guide me through any storm" (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 121).

One South African participant recalled how he had lived with his grandparents in Cape Town as a child. At the age of 12, he came home to find his grandparents standing outside their house with all their possessions. The apartheid government had decided to relocate a community of mixed-race people, who had lived there for over 100 years, to re-zone the area as a white-only area. He and his family were forcibly relocated to an area far from his school and everyone they knew. He told me this story when I asked him what the "one thing" was, that kept him going through adversity as a business owner. Once he finished his story he sat quietly for some time and then he said, "I keep going so that no one can ever put my family on a pavement again." Max van Manen (2017, p. 779) well summarises my feelings in this moment: "Genuine phenomenological inquiry is challenging and satisfying precisely because its meaningful revelations must be originary and existentially compelling to the soul."

### **Resilience and self-efficacy are not fixed traits**

These adversity thrivers had two qualities in common. The first was resilience, a strong sense of belief in one's own capabilities and the other was self-efficacy, the ability to keep moving forwards through adverse conditions and bounce back, or forwards from devastating failure (Ashely & Reiter-Palmon, 2012; Hines, 2004). Resilience is often referred to as a fixed trait or personality type that one either does or does not have. Based on my own observations as an entrepreneurial trainer, resilience is more accurately described as a set of positive coping behaviours leading to efficient and effective recovery from challenges, pressure, stress, and trauma (Stemmet, 2021). It became evident through the stories of the participants that no one taught them about who they were and what they were capable of – life had taught them through experience; the hard way. These participants presented, through lived experience, evidence of how both reflective and experiential learning is untaught (Moon, 2004). They viewed risk as less scary because they had experienced extreme vulnerability and they had not just survived but thrived. They were not born to be entrepreneurs but were driven to entrepreneurship by the desire to become the masters of their own destinies because they had learned that no one else could be trusted to that role. Whilst two personality types (the more controlling ones) were more common in our sample, there were exceptions. This finding is in line with other research that entrepreneurs are a heterogeneous group within multidisciplinary environments (Leitch & Volery, 2017).

### **The compassionate and sensitive side**

I found that the adversity thriver pattern was not just self-preservation focussed but included a deeply rooted desire to protect others in their care. They had found meaning from their suffering and used this meaning to make a wider contribution to others, another central finding of resilience research (Stemmet, 2021). As each interview wound up, I told participants about the purpose of the study of better preparing future entrepreneurial leaders by laying a foundation of self-awareness, self-leadership and the ability to influence others positively earlier in their education. This was only revealed at the end of the interview to avoid creating expectations in answers to my questions. Most of the participants were enthusiastic about the aim of the project and shared that one of their key concerns, as parents, was how to equip their children with the traits they had developed through their own experiences, whilst protecting them from the pain and suffering they had endured through their formative years. The consistent element of the concern for the protection of others in their care suggests that the adversity thriver pattern includes an uncommon mix of high levels of self-efficacy and resilience alongside a deeply compassionate and sensitive side. Many recognised that they had translated their drive, attained through adversity, not into creating the world's best business, but into changing people's lives.

While telling their stories, none of the participants saw themselves as victims. They took on sole responsibility for their own well-being and the well-being of those around them. This response could be a reason why entrepreneurs are often labelled as superhuman or heroes in the media. This enquiry led to another insightful finding in the research; the entrepreneur's identity crisis.

## **PATTERN TWO: THE ENTREPRENEUR'S IDENTITY CRISIS**

Early in the interviews, I noticed the participants felt uncomfortable about being labelled as entrepreneurs. Many felt that they did not fit this label as they only led one business. Others felt that the more traditionally held views of entrepreneurs as superhuman, super-wealthy, highly innovative go-getters did not fit, regardless of their many business ventures. Others quickly pointed out that being self-employed differed, in their view, to being an entrepreneur. They felt displaced by the fact that society wants to identify them with a label, usually attached to a role.

Previous research on the development of self-identity came to the fore in considering how common an issue this identity crisis was among the participants. The participating entrepreneurs voiced a common feeling of dichotomy between their sense of individuality as an entrepreneurial leader and their sense of place in a collective system of cultural and societal norms. This sense of place is described in entrepreneurial research as identity legitimacy, which is often withheld from entrepreneurs who are deemed to behave differently and inspire envy within a wider social and cultural context (Anderson et al., 2019). In New Zealand, this phenomenon is officially called 'tall poppy syndrome' where the otherness of entrepreneurs is highlighted in a negative way (Kirkwood, 2007; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020).

### **Why we need to belong**

Previous research suggests that humans are born with certain sub-conscious, hard-wired systems to ensure their survival. One of these is the ability to recognise their "tribe" (Bargh, 2017). This innate tendency leads, as explained by social identity theory, to an in-group versus out-group distinction. Through a process called self-categorisation, self-identity is adopted from their surrounding in-group regarding their cultural and societal norms (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Most participants seemed to navigate their entrepreneurial paths comfortably within their cultural and societal norms. Interestingly, when asked how their cultural backgrounds had influenced their journeys as entrepreneurial leaders, they were unable to accredit any recognisable patterns of influence, across the four ethnicities represented within the sample. Identity theory explains the creation of our self-identity through the adoption of recognised roles within society (Hogg et al., 1995) and this is where the entrepreneurs seemed to become lost. Between their hard wiring to survive and their soft wiring to belong, they realised they had unwittingly arrived in an environment where they were afforded few fitting labels as entrepreneurs.

During the interviews, many of the participants expressed difficulty in finding their place of belonging within a socially recognised professional identity. Whilst driven and pioneering in their professions, the human part of them struggled with the lack of belonging and connection as human beings. Interestingly, many entrepreneurial leaders included "tea and coffee maker" when describing their roles. This role description offers a far more authentic reflection of the true nature of an entrepreneur than any high-flying title could achieve. It seemed a travesty that these individuals who stood so solidly simultaneously in front of, and behind their many stakeholders during a crisis, felt so isolated. The terms 'hero' and 'superhuman', used by the media to describe a minority of entrepreneurs, such as Richard Branson and Elon Musk, seemed to have isolated the majority, who are quietly making a difference in their worlds.

## CONCLUSION

By identifying these two patterns in Phase Two, by means of a phenomenological lens of enquiry, this research captured the essence of the 'working around entrepreneurial leader' through COVID-19, differently to how labels such as 'superhero' might have. These findings support previous findings that entrepreneurs do not become entrepreneurs only because they are born with certain traits (Gartner, 1988). These participants were driven to entrepreneurship through circumstances and became leaders due to the nature of the entrepreneurial context (Leitch & Volery, 2017). When asked if they felt deserving of a 'hero' label, many pointed towards their staff, other stakeholders, or family members as the real heroes behind their success. It was relatively easy to get these resilient, humble and deeply caring participants to agree to an interview which required 50 to 60 minutes of their time. Many reflected, when receiving a thank-you note, that they had really enjoyed the experience. Entrepreneurial leadership, whilst perceived as exciting, challenging and somewhat glamorous, can also be lonely, with few appropriate peers or available mentors to talk to. It was both a professional privilege and a personal joy to interact with them, within their space, for this research project as both a co-traveller and a researcher, caught in the challenging and unknown phenomenon of COVID-19.

**Sandy Geyer** is both an entrepreneurial leader and practitioner in the area of business leadership and entrepreneurial leadership preparation. Based in Auckland, she is currently undergoing her Doctorate of Professional Practice at Capable NZ, which aims to better prepare future entrepreneurs for effective entrepreneurial leadership, earlier in their education.

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