

# G U I D E P O S T

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## WHAT SUSTAINS A BELIEF IN SUCCESS AMONG THE UNSUCCESSFUL?

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I have been haunted by the question of what sustains belief in success among the unsuccessful ever since I read Reinhard Bendix's (1956) magisterial book, *Work and Authority in Industry*. Bendix wrote about the economic ideology that kept millions of people in England, the United States, and other Western capitalist societies working in arduous and poorly paying jobs believing that someday, sooner or later, their hard work would be rewarded. Bendix argued that this ideology enabled developing capitalist societies to survive, despite the hardships experienced by their working classes and the demonstrable economic inequality produced by economic growth. In my own research on entrepreneurship, I have been perplexed by how many people are attracted to the allure of starting their own businesses, despite overwhelming evidence of the low odds of success (Aldrich & Yang, 2012).

I was reminded of this question a few years ago after finishing a fruitless 6 hours of fly-fishing at a local lake. Along with the other members of my small fishing group, I had spent the day in bitterly cold weather, casting into a howling wind, with almost nothing to show for it. This was not an atypical day, except for the cold, as we often spent an entire day fly-fishing without catching more than a handful of fish. Nonetheless, every week, on our appointed day, we trekked back to the lake and tried it again.

On the way home from the lake, I found myself thinking about the similarities between my fly-fishing experience and experience of underemployed members of the creative professions that I had been studying, as well as my research on nascent entrepreneurs. Actors, musicians, authors, dancers, filmmakers, and others often spend years without finding steady employment in their profession, sustaining themselves by working in jobs that may have

little or no connection to their professional identity. For example, at the beginning of 2012, a report by the Actor's Equity Association (McMahon, 2012) revealed that the average unemployment rate for actors was around 90 percent. Similarly, for nascent entrepreneurs, the likelihood of persisting with a business five years after beginning the effort is less than 50 percent (Yang & Aldrich, 2017).

One of my friends asked whether I would accept an analogy between the experience of athletes who often experience "failures" through losses in competition and the experience of infrequently employed creative artistic professionals. I said "no because the context for athletic failures is quite different." Athletes, whether amateur or professional, are competing within a context where there are rules that govern their actions. Every athletic contest has a winner and a loser, determined by rules that were set *a priori*. The very nature of athletic competition mandates that someone will lose in every game.

By contrast, fly-fishermen, entrepreneurs, and creative professionals are operating in a highly uncertain context. There are some well-established and standardized procedures for acquiring the skills needed to potentially do well as an angler or artist, but for any given performance, whether it will be a "success" or "failure" is highly uncertain. They control their performance but not how it is perceived by audiences or reviewed by critics.

In addition, many products produced by creative professionals and entrepreneurs either fail to get distributed or lose money when they are distributed. Hirsch (1972) pointed to the overproduction of many cultural products, such as films, records and CDs, books, and plays, resulting in large numbers never reaching their intended audiences. American playwrights, for example, consider themselves fortunate if their new plays are produced for a second or third time after their premier. Many are produced once and never appear in a theater again. Similarly, thousands of films are produced each year, but less

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than 1,000 have a theatrical release (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/187122/movie-releases-in-north-america-since-2001/>). Finally, thousands of books are written each year, but an average book has less than a 1 percent chance of being stocked in an average bookstore. Most nonfiction books in the United States sell less than 250 copies/year from all sources, including online (<https://outthinkgroup.com/the-10-awful-truths-about-book-publishing/>).

So, in the face of such long odds, what sustains a belief in success among these unsuccessful creative professionals and entrepreneurs? As I drove home, I pondered the similarities between these artists, entrepreneurs, and fly-fishermen. Admittedly, initially it seemed a bit of a stretch, but then I remembered some principles I had learned as a social psychology minor in graduate school and began searching for more recent research on behavioral persistence under challenging circumstances. I also looked again at the sociological literature on craft workers and the burgeoning literature on entrepreneurship. I found several lines of research that showed promise in helping me understand the puzzle I had observed.

First, as we know from behavioral psychology, *intermittent reinforcement* is a very powerful force in sustaining a behavior (Deslauriers & Everett, 1977). Indeed, intermittent reinforcement—receiving reinforcement on an unpredictable schedule—is more powerful than receiving reinforcement consistently after every trial. For anglers, it seems that all it takes is a few successful catches in a day to create the feeling that the day has been a success. Perhaps for people in the creative arts and crafts, making an occasional sale, winning a commission or award, or simply being recognized at exhibits or craft fairs is enough to sustain their beliefs.

Second, I think we gain greater understanding if we consider the context within which people are embedded and not just their personal characteristics. People in the creative professions strongly resemble anglers and entrepreneurs in that participants display a high degree of intrinsic motivation, relative to other occupations (Auger & Woodman, 2016; Nikolaev, Boudreaux, & Wood, 2019). Critically, many are also operating within a larger supportive context. Researchers have discovered that when you put *intrinsically motivated people in environments that support autonomous behavior*, rather than controlling it, people learn more deeply and persist in their learning (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). Anglers, especially fly-fishermen, are often part of a resilient community that gives them a strong sense of shared fate with other anglers. Fly-fishermen have magazines, blogs, videos, television

programs, voluntary associations, and other mechanisms enabling them to communicate with others who share their passion. I believe the same is true of many entrepreneurs as well as people in craft work and the creative professions.

Ethnographers who have studied creative professionals and craft workers in context have documented the strong support networks that many of them draw upon. For example, Riley's (2017) participant observation study of standup comedians in Los Angeles showed that career progress depended on comedians building a strong network of relationships, particularly with mentors and people who would endorse them. Ocejo (2017) documented the uncertain nature of careers of craft workers in four industries: cocktail bars, niche distilleries of spirits, high-end men's barbershops, and high-end urban whole-animal butchers. Many were sustained by their experience in becoming part of a culture that celebrated "maker" identity—skilled craft work that gave them status in the eyes of fellow workers. In her long-term research on guitar makers, Dudley (2014) also found that craft workers building highly sought-after instruments tolerated bouts of financial stringency because of the status they earned in the eyes of fellow craftsmen. Being embedded within a larger community of like-minded people thus sustained workers through difficult times.

Third, if someone has experienced *powerful socialization pressures* that gave them a strong occupational identity and they are able to stay connected to their occupational community, they may tolerate a great deal of misery before abandoning that identity. Accordingly, people who strongly identify with their artistic craft and have that belief periodically reinforced may continue to hold on to that belief, regardless of having few opportunities to demonstrate their prowess. In support of this argument, Lena and Lindemann (2014) investigated the issue of artistic identity using data from a large survey of individuals who had pursued an arts degree in the United States. They noted that many workers who defined themselves as artists did not hold artistic jobs. Their report focused on the very large group that said they had worked in an occupation associated with the arts but who did not identify as a "professional artist." However, what caught my eye in the survey was a much smaller number of people who said they either currently or at one time had worked as a professional artist but then indicated in another question that they had *never* worked in an *occupation* associated with the arts. This small group of people apparently had sustained a sense of being an artistic professional although never having an opportunity to work in an occupation associated with the arts.

Based on my reading and previous research, I have identified several research questions that are worth

following up. First, do craft workers, creative professionals, and entrepreneurs persist because they publish, record, perform, or otherwise display their talents just often enough to maintain a belief that someday they will “make it big”? Is intermittent reinforcement at the individual level a key factor in persistence? Is there some standard of *minimally acceptable performance* that keeps them in the game? One way to research this question would be to obtain longitudinal data on representative samples of these groups and keep track of the length of the career spells that involve “successes” versus those that involve people working in jobs not related to their occupational identity. Until studies are purposefully designed to investigate this question, existing longitudinal data sets on workers’ careers might provide enough detailed information to begin to answer this question. Another method would involve ethnographic research of the kind that Dudley, Ocejo, and Riley carried out, with ethnographers immersing themselves in the occupational community and observing the daily consequences of workers’ failing to live up to the promises implied by their claimed identities.

Second, does a belief in success among the unsuccessful persist because people are members of local communities of creative professionals and nascent entrepreneurs who reinforce one another’s beliefs, helping sustain the perception that they are just going through a temporary bad patch? In my fieldwork, I have met dozens of artisans who supply their work to local shops that nurture them with special events, displays of their work, and other acknowledgments of their existence. From this perspective, the contexts within which individuals are pursuing their dreams matters just as much for persistence as intrinsic motivation. Research on the social networks of craft workers, creative professionals, and nascent entrepreneurs could shed light on the extent to which social ties buffer workers from giving into feelings of failure and desperation when they do not achieve what is implied by their occupational identity.

Existing survey instruments could be used for this research, but bounding a community in which social network research would be feasible is a daunting challenge (Aldrich & Kim, 2007). Again, ethnographers studying creative craft workers and professionals have already shown the way, as I have indicated in reviewing some of their work (Watson, 2011). However, a close reading of those ethnographies also shows that gaining access to such communities is an arduous and time-consuming endeavor. The ethnographies I have reviewed took years to accomplish, with their task made more difficult because management and organization researchers not trained

in ethnography face a steep learning curve (Stewart & Aldrich, 2015).

Third, from a neo-institutional theory point of view, researchers could raise the larger question of why so many people in modern capitalist societies still buy into the trope of success through individual achievement. In my own work, I have focused on the cultural appeal of “entrepreneurship” and have approached this question in several ways. First, I have argued that many institutions in modern society support and disseminate arguments in support of achieving economic success through business ownership. For example, the mass media routinely celebrates entrepreneurship with strongly positive stories that convey the impression the business ownership is not only desirable but feasible for just about everyone (Aldrich & Yang, 2012). Second, I have argued that one consequence of contemporary culture’s emphasis on success through individual achievement via entrepreneurship is that many people want to “be” entrepreneurs (Meyer, 2008). However, what aspiring individuals will not find in the midst of this celebration are the tools needed to successfully become entrepreneurs (Aldrich, 2010). As a result, success will be elusive.

The research project implied by taking a neo-institutional perspective would need to be global in scope. Just as some occupational communities within cities or regions are more favorable to the perpetuation of belief in success among the unsuccessful, so too are some national contexts more favorable. For several decades, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor or “GEM” project has tried to capture national differences in people’s beliefs about the desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurship (Reynolds, Bygrave, & Autio, 2004), and other projects studying “world values” have also conducted surveys across countries (Inglehart, 2018). What I would like to add to these projects is greater emphasis on discovering beliefs and values that give people an “out” in cases where they do not achieve the “success” called for in societies’ institutional environments. What are the acceptable excuses for the unsuccessful people who failed to find comfort from what they learned about success in their society?

Why do millions of people the world over cling to the belief that they can be successful “artists” or “entrepreneurs,” despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary? An answer to this question should be sought, I believe, not only in their personal characteristics but also in the social and cultural contexts within which they are embedded. I have argued that beliefs in success among the unsuccessful are not delusions, but instead reflect humanity’s evolution

as a social species. We need more research to help us discover how the process works.

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