

A Theory-based Empirical Study of Entrepreneurship in Iqaluit, Nunavut (Formerly Frobisher Bay, Northwest Territories)

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Abstract

Findings, of this exploratory study, suggest that service firms in Iqaluit are often launched by former employees of larger firms who become entrepreneurs; these entrepreneurs are usually mainstream English-Canadians or French-Canadians, and growth is often important for them. In contrast, indigenous Inuit¹ often identify more with the land and with sharing its resources, than with Western-style mainstream entrepreneurship; their activities are often forms of informal and subsistence self-employment, such as hunting caribou, polar bears and seals for food and for pelts. This contradicts the popular notion that entrepreneurship is universal. Entrepreneurship among the Inuit is different in form and substance from the commonly accepted model, and one size does not fit all.

Introduction

In the words of McCall, “There are many more nations in the world than there are states for them (1980, pp. 538-539).” Among these are the Inuit of northern Canada, whose homeland is Nunavut, Canada’s third territory, created as the result of the largest land-claims agreement in Canadian history.

Named after Sir Martin Frobisher, and known until January 1, 1987 as Frobisher Bay, Iqaluit is the main town on Baffin Island, and the capital city of Nunavut. The name Iqaluit means “place of fish,” in Inuktitut, the language used by Inuit people of the region – descendants of the Thule. The streets in this town have no names.

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of an exploratory field study of entrepreneurship in Iqaluit. Although the Inuit are not considered First Nations, they are indigenous in that they are people whose ancestors were living in the region prior to colonisation. Inhabitants of Iqaluit call themselves Iqlalummuit, the singular of which is Iqlalummuk. The official languages here are English, French, Inuktitut² and Inuinnaqtun.

Methodology

Broad typologies of entrepreneurs were first identified, in a literature search. The principal researcher then conducted in-depth interviews in Iqaluit. Respondents were identified using the snowballing technique, requesting each interviewee to recommend other people to be interviewed. In the words of Müller-Wille and Hukkinen, “In snowball sampling of interviewees,

¹ The singular of Inuit is Inuk. The Inuit are one of the three constitutionally recognized groups of Indigenous people in Canada. The other two are the Metis and the First Nations.

² In northern Quebec and in the eastern Arctic (including Baffin Island), Inuktitut uses a writing system based on syllabics.

those already interviewed identify who else they think should be interviewed (1999, p. 47).” As discussed by Goodman (1961), interviewing stops only when the last respondent can only suggest individuals already named by others. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, in order to capture what people wished to say, in their own words. Data were verified for consistency and reliability, by recording details and using triangulation for verification. By means of content analysis, each interviewee was classified into the category, the key words of which had the highest incidence rate in the testimony.

Universal but Not Uniform

Morris wrote, “entrepreneurship is a universal construct that is applicable to any person, organization, (public, or private, large or small), or nation (1995).” Does enterprise develop the same way amongst all peoples? Early on, in a prescient statement, the convergent perspective was clearly stated by Richman and Farmer, “As the general similarity of men everywhere is recognized, and as managerial and technological necessity presses all types of culture toward a common road, nations everywhere become more similar; the logic of technology and management will lead all to the same general position (1965, p. 400).”

In contrast to the above, advocates of the divergent position include Hofstede (1980) and Laurent (1983). Based on his research with INSEAD students, Laurent concluded, “Deep seated managerial assumptions are strongly shaped by national cultures and appear quite insensitive to the more transient culture of organizations (1983, p. 75).” More recently, Huntington (1993; 1996) showed that globalisation has neither standardised societies, nor produced a homogeneous world culture.

It is useful to distinguish between the tools of these disciplines and the contexts in which these tools are used, the choices made from among alternatives and the reasons for these choices, the desired results from the application of the selected tools, and the interpretation of the outcomes. While the tools and techniques may be becoming increasing universal, the context, choice, expectations and outcomes relating to their application are not.

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Take for example the management tools and techniques available for the comparison of the attractiveness of alternative long-term investment or development possibilities. The mathematical logic of net present value, discounted cash flow, payback period and accounting rate can be said to be universal. Yet, what gets included in each as costs and as a benefits, what is perceived to be as an acceptable rate of return and/or payback period, the weight given to non-quantifiable factors and so on is far from universal; it is highly contextual. Consider the Uwa people in Columbia. They have been offered attractive arrangements in return for allowing exploration and extraction of oil from their traditional lands. By mainstream management measures assessing the value of these long-term arrangements, the offers are extremely attractive. However, the Uwa are not even tempted to accept. None of the universal tools captured the one thing that is paramount to the Uwa. Their adamant stand is that the oil is the blood of mother earth and under no circumstances can it be extracted. They find incomprehensible the notion of allowing such damage to be done in exchange a package of benefits not matter how attractive from a business and economic development perspective, in spite of the general acceptance of practice in the industrial economy. The Uwa have successfully resisted the development efforts of the national government and the multinational oil companies and the project has been abandoned, at least for the time being. Will the logic of technology and

management lead the Uwa to abandon this position in the future? The Uwa answer is unequivocal. They threaten to commit mass suicide before they will ever allow the oil to be extracted (Raeburn, Timmons, and Shari, 2000).

Different cultures perceive benefits differently and the same is true of entrepreneurship opportunity. Scheinberg and Macmillan (1988) found significant differences across cultures in motivations to launch a new business. A problem identified by Davidsson and Delmar (1992) is that most studies have concentrated on entrepreneurs and ignored the general population from which these entrepreneurs emerged. An empirical study comparing indigenous and non-indigenous entrepreneurs concluded that the perception of opportunity is a function of culture (Dana, 1995). Of course, people from different ethnic backgrounds have been exposed to dissimilar cultural values, and this is reflected in their respective entrepreneurship models. Entrepreneurship is therefore not homogeneous around the world. Unfortunately, however, mainstream systems often pressure minorities to conform to models that ignore cultural variables. Indigenous entrepreneurship does not necessarily fit into a box created by the industrialized West. In fact, Hindle and Lansdowne suggested that, "Indigenous entrepreneurship is the creation, management and development of new ventures by Indigenous people for the benefit of Indigenous people (2002, p. 2)."

Manker (1953) examined entrepreneurship among indigenous Sámi people in Sweden. Ingold (1978) studied indigenous entrepreneurs in Finland. Dana (1995) presented findings of a study about indigenous entrepreneurship in Alaska. Anderson (1995) reported on indigenous enterprise in Saskatchewan. Dana (1996) compared indigenous and non-indigenous entrepreneurs in Churchill, Manitoba. Jernsletten and Klovov (2002) examined indigenous entrepreneurship in Mongolia. Tuisku (2002) provided an account of entrepreneurship among indigenous people in Siberia. Bjørklund (2004) provided an account of indigenous self-employment in Norway. What is the picture like in Canada's newest territory? Here, the indigenous people are the majority, and "mainstream" Canadians comprise ethnic minorities.

A Theoretical Framework: Orthodox, Reactionary, Informal and Internal Self-Employment

Much literature discusses the entrepreneur who is a high achiever, an individual with that which McClelland (1961) termed a high n-ach. The character traits of this type of entrepreneur have been discussed at length by Begley and Boyd (1987); Gasse (1977); Kets de Vries (1977); Sexton and Upton (1990); Shaver and Scott (1991); Timmons, Smoller and Dingee (1985); and others. Dana (1997) called these orthodox entrepreneurs. We call these Opportunity Seekers.

There are also people who are self-employed, not because of an entrepreneurial drive, but as a result of frustrating circumstances. Hagen (1962) discussed such entrepreneurs who are self-employed as a result of social grievance. Shapero (1975) focused on entrepreneurs who were displaced persons. This was elaborated upon by Shapero and Sokol (1982) and by Shapero (1984). Ladbury (1984) and Min (1984; 1986-7) also noted the marginalisation of entrepreneurs. Brenner (1987) noted that entrepreneurship was a means to face adverse circumstance. Ray (1993) used the term bounded to describe this type of entrepreneurship. Dana (1997) used the term reactionary to describe entrepreneurs engaged in bounded entrepreneurship. Likewise, we call these people Reactionary Entrepreneurs.

There are also individuals who are self-employed, yet who prefer to keep their enterprises informal. Informal economic activity has been the subject of De Soto (1989); Morris and Pitt (1995); Peattie (1987); Portes, Castells and Benton (1989); Rosser, Rosser and Ahmed (2000); Sanders (1987); and Tokman (1978). Unrecorded cash sales circumvent taxation as well as regulation. The law is often bent, but authorities generally tolerate the sector. Often, informal self-employment is a supplement to wage or welfare income. Johnson, Kaufmann, and Zoido-Lobaton (1998) discuss discretion in the sector. We use the term Informal Entrepreneurs to refer to people engaged in this sector.

In addition to the above, some people engage in internal subsistence activity. Cole and Fayissa (1991) describe this in detail. Internal subsistence activity refers to that which is consumed internally rather than sold. Thus, this category of economic activity is described as internal, because it does not involve an external exchange; no business transaction takes place. Wealth is created, but nothing is sold for profit; that which is created is consumed or saved for personal use. Internal subsistence activity includes subsistence hunting and subsistence fishing. There is no market transaction external to the producer.

Historical Overview

“Baffin, the world’s fourth largest island, takes its name from the English navigator, William Baffin (1584-1622). So indented are its shores that explorers long considered it an archipelago (Bartlett, 1946, p. 602).”

Sovereignty over Baffin Island was transferred from Britain to the Dominion of Canada, in 1880. In 1939, a Supreme Court ruling brought the Inuit under federal jurisdiction. In 1942, the United States was permitted to construct an airbase, off the Greenland Sea, at Frobisher Bay, a long indentation into the island’s eastern coast. A town, of the same name, subsequently grew with the construction of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line³ – a system of radar stations set up to protect North America during the Cold War. For decades during which Baffin Island was part of the Northwest Territories, Frobisher Bay served as the administrative centre of the District of Franklin.

For the traditional Inuit, survival depended on collective activities. People often hunted in groups and shared the meat. Unlike people of the Western Arctic, who lived in paternal groups, the South Baffin Island Inuit lived with relatives of both parents. During summers they hunted caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), and in winters, they hunted sea mammals, mostly seals; once a seal was harpooned, its wound would be plugged with ivory pins, in order to prevent the blood from being wasted.

In the words of Parfit, “There was no cash in early Inuit life. People traded and shared. So stature among the Inuit had nothing to do with wealth. A male Inuk (singular for Inuit) was highly regarded for hunting skills, calmness under stress, the ability to make decisions, and how abundantly he shared meat (1997, p. 78).”

Mary-Rousseliere wrote about the modernisation of the Inuit people on Baffin Island during the 1960s, and the transition from subsistence self-employment to salaried employment:

³ For an account of the DEW Line, see La Fay (1958).

I had given Alain Maktaq a small transistor radio to reward him for work he had done at the mission. To my dismay, he insisted on paying me for it.

“I caught many foxes this winter, Father,” he told me, “and I have much more money than I need to provide for my family. What would I do with it all?”

This took place only a decade ago. An Eskimo of Baffin Island, in the Canadian Arctic, Alain lived in a turf hut lighted and heated by seal oil. He fed himself and about ten dependents by hunting narwhal and seal. His whole fortune consisted of some 15 dogs, a homemade sled, two rifles, 200 traps, a canoe, and an old outboard motor patched with bits of wire.

Today Alain lives in a comfortable house built, lighted and heated by the government...An employee of the Government ...he has a bank account, buys a new snowmobile every year, and thinks of getting an automobile. From the south he gets meat, eggs, vegetables, and fruit (1971, pp. 189-190).

Aikio wrote, “No more than 30 years ago it was thought that tribal and other indigenous peoples were destined to become assimilated to the main populations of their ancestral lands... Towards the 1980s, however, this attitude was reversed. Nowadays, nobody believes that it is the fate of indigenous people, like a law of nature, to become assimilated (1993, p. 15).” Likewise, Daes asserted, “Indigenous peoples ...do not accept the assumption that humanity will benefit from the construction of a world culture of consumerism (2003, p. 67).” He complained that globalization “is dissolving all cultures into a single supermarket with standard brands (Daes, 2003, p. 68).”

In 1991, political leaders from across Canada agreed that a revised constitution must recognise native people’s inherent right to self-government. April 1, 1999, marked the launch of a remarkable experiment in aboriginal self-government, as an Inuit homeland was carved out of the Northwest Territories, and the territory of Nunavut was created. (Nunavut means “our land” in Inuktitut.) Thus, 26,000 people gained control of 734,000 square miles, one fifth the land of Canada. Iqaluit became the capital city of the new territory. Nunavut was home to 30,000 people in 2004, 85% of these indigenous people.

Beliefs & Values

Traditional religion among the South Baffin Island Inuit focused on the natural environment. Nature was respected. In the words of Wilkinson, “Eskimo hunters killed only to meet the needs of the day as they believed the soul of a dead seal would return to seek vengeance (1970, p. 134).”

During the 19th century, contact with outsiders included missionaries who converted the Inuit to Christianity. Once converted, the Inuit gave up many of their traditional practices, such as spouse exchange. Respect for nature, however, was not forgotten. Neither was traditional art.

Early art forms included charms and masks that were carved out of bone or stone, for religious purposes. Nowadays, Inuit sculptures are sought after for their artistic beauty, and therefore made for their market value, rather than for religious beliefs.

While the Inuit of Baffin Island accepted the new religion, many also retained traditional values and beliefs. Among these is the belief that one should focus on the present, rather than stockpile for the future. Among the traditional values to survive is the notion of decision-making by consensus, a concept quite different from that of the independent entrepreneur in Western literature. In this sense, some traditional beliefs survived, and while these are compatible with the sustainability and environmental balance, they are incongruent with wealth-accumulating entrepreneurship.

Findings

Although most Iqalummuit are indigenous people, indigenous people are under-represented in the realm of Western-style formal entrepreneurship in Iqaluit. This is true when considering orthodox opportunity seeking as well as reactionary self-employment.

For this paper, formal entrepreneurs (Opportunity Seekers and Reactionary Entrepreneurs) and informal entrepreneurs were interviewed. Fifty-seven interviews were conducted with formal entrepreneurs, individuals who earn a living by exercising “some control over the means of production and produces more than he can consume in order to sell (or exchange) it for individual (or household) income (McClelland, 1961, p. 65).” Clustering these according to mother-tongue, 11 were mainstream (non-indigenous) Francophones, originally from Quebec, six were mainstream Anglophones from Quebec, 35 were mainstream Anglophones from elsewhere (largely from Eastern Canada, Newfoundland in particular), including the United Kingdom, one said that his mother tongue was Arabic, one said that her mother tongue was German, and three were indigenous Inuit. One of the Inuit had moved to Iqaluit from Pangnirtung.

Content analysis of interviews suggests that 34 of these respondents were active opportunity seekers. This included six of the 11 Francophones, five of the six Anglophones from Quebec, and 23 of the 35 other Anglophones. The word “growth” often came up in discussions. Of the six Francophone opportunity seekers, three specified that they had left their jobs to become self-employed. Of the five Anglophone opportunity seekers from Quebec four had quit their jobs. Of the 23 other Anglophone opportunity seekers, 13 had quit their jobs. Several interviewees left government jobs, in some cases with the intention of sub-contracting to the government. The creation of Nunavut was perceived as creating many government-related opportunities. One Francophone, one Quebec Anglophone and 16 other Anglophones were owner-managers of more than one enterprise. Among the reasons for being self-employed were: “I just had to do it (Interviewee #9),” and “It had always been my aim to work for myself (Interviewee #33).”

There were also Reactionary Entrepreneurs, individuals who described themselves as having been pushed into self-employment, due to circumstance. Five of the 11 Francophones belong in this category, as do five Anglophones (none of these from Quebec). Among the reasons for becoming self-employed were: “I could not speak English so I could not find no job (Interviewee #39),” and “There was no jobs here and it was the only way I could stay here after my contract was finished (Interviewee #44).”

The Egyptian interviewee had left Egypt because he was Christian and therefore marginalised. Marginality in Egypt drove him to become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Iqaluit, where he created jobs for other Egyptians and formed an ethnic enclave. Coleman wrote about this interviewee's impact, "The arcade has changed the neighbourhood (1992, p. 4)." In fact, this respondent could be described as an agent of social change, as discussed by Barth (1963; 1967).

Only seven interviewees were university educated professionals. The Egyptian entrepreneur was among these. We note that among university graduates, Reactionary Entrepreneurs are prominent. In other words, their education did not lead them to become opportunity seeking entrepreneurs. Instead, the tendency was to become self-employed as a reaction to circumstance, such as not being able to find employment.

In the sample were seven commuters, who were owner-managers in Iqaluit, but whose domicile was elsewhere. Three travelled from Montreal, three from Ontario and one from Fort McMurray, Alberta.

If only three of 57 formal entrepreneurs interviewed were Inuit, what is to be said about the other self-employed Inuit? For the indigenous Inuit, cultural identity is rooted in nature and in sharing. This is maintained through stories, dance, traditions and an informal economy that improves family and community well being, by means of sharing and informal exchanges of goods and services. Informal and internal self-employment is very popular among these people, as these forms of economic activity are socially acceptable, and compatible with their cultural identity.

Across Baffin Island, many Inuit people continue to fish and hunt for subsistence. Such informal and internal economic activities are often a supplement to wage employment or to welfare payments. Hunting ringed seal continues to be common on Baffin Island. In former times, the hunter kept only the pelt and the top of the stomach for his family; the rest was shared with members of the community. Even today, food is shared as a symbol of friendship. Surplus caribou hides are given to families who do not have hunters.

Toward the Future

Southerners have quickly responded to change and to entrepreneurial opportunities arising therefrom. The Frobisher Bay Pan Am staff house, for example, was given a new life when no longer needed as such and therefore transformed into the Discovery Lodge Hotel. For the indigenous people, however, enterprising takes place in different forms than Western-style entrepreneurship. Young people expressed that they feel caught between two worlds, not knowing which path to take.

Economic development will continue to take place in Nunavut. How can the indigenous people maintain what they value in their culture, and yet fully participate in the economy? Future research might focus on indigenous culture, values and entrepreneurship in Baffin Island, and elsewhere in the Canadian north. As suggested by Dana (1995), the use of ethnographic methods would be most appropriate, in order to record the entrepreneurship experiences of indigenous people in their own words, with minimal cultural bias.

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