



THE PIVOT: HOW FOUNDERS RESPOND TO FEEDBACK THROUGH IDEA AND IDENTITY WORK

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Abstract:	<p>Efforts to incorporate external feedback are central to the process of entrepreneurship and that of creative work more broadly, yet because individuals may view aspects of their creative ideas as linked to their self-concepts, this can trigger resistance toward revision. Thus feedback-induced change while likely intended to increase the viability of creative ideas, might thus paradoxically undermine that viability by compromising creative workers' associated identity-based relationships with their creative endeavors. While existing scholarship has established the importance of creative revision, research has largely overlooked how this vital process intersects with creative workers' identities. Through a field study of 59 founders and their entrepreneurial ideas, I present an identity-based process model of creative revision that highlights differences in founders' psychological ownership of their ideas and how those differences affect subsequent revision efforts. The emerging findings contribute to existing theory by revealing that the capacity to extend the novelty and usefulness of one's ideas is not merely subject to informational constraints but also to identity-based constraints.</p>

The Pivot: How Founders Respond to Feedback through Idea and Identity Work

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THE PIVOT: HOW FOUNDERS RESPOND TO FEEDBACK THROUGH IDEA AND IDENTITY WORK

ABSTRACT

Efforts to incorporate external feedback are central to the process of entrepreneurship and that of creative work more broadly, yet because individuals may view aspects of their creative ideas as linked to their self-concepts, this can trigger resistance toward revision. Thus feedback-induced change while likely intended to increase the viability of creative ideas, might thus paradoxically undermine that viability by compromising creative workers' associated identity-based relationships with their creative endeavors. While existing scholarship has established the importance of creative revision, research has largely overlooked how this vital process intersects with creative workers' identities. Through a field study of 59 founders and their entrepreneurial ideas, I present an identity-based process model of creative revision that highlights differences in founders' psychological ownership of their ideas and how those differences affect subsequent revision efforts. The emerging findings contribute to existing theory by revealing that the capacity to extend the novelty and usefulness of one's ideas is not merely subject to informational constraints but also to identity-based constraints.

Every founder has to be determined and stubborn...But a great founder—she also realizes that she can be that stubborn and determined but also adaptive and flexible.

– Alexis O'Hanian, Partner at YCombinator¹

I started this company because the idea spoke to me. It's about who I am as a person and how I see the world...But this is also why this whole process of shopping my idea around to investors is difficult, because when I open up my idea to criticism, I'm also exposing myself, if that makes sense. I'm just not sure how much I'm willing to change about my idea, because that would mean changing an important part of me.

– Founder of a 1-month old health care startup

Recently, scholars have begun to establish the significance of the creative revision process, whereby feedback providers and recipients engage in efforts to improve the novelty and usefulness of an idea (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015). This research on creative revision is important, because it reveals a process that is interactive and evolving, in which the viability of creative work involves exposing one's

¹ <https://soundcloud.com/tim-ferriss/alexis-ohanian>

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3 ideas or prototypes and responding to feedback from potential stakeholders (e.g., resource
4 providers). Such a perspective on creative revision is perhaps most clearly relevant in
5 contexts such as the early stages of innovation and entrepreneurship, wherein individuals
6 attempt to commercialize their ideas, necessitating interactions with potential
7 stakeholders to improve the alignment between their proposed ideas and the markets or
8 audiences they are attempting to reach and influence (Bammens & Collewaert, 2014;
9 Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001).

19 This recent work on the interactive process of creative revision opens up
20 opportunities for research on the dynamic and complex reality of how creative workers
21 respond to feedback. One such opportunity relates to how feedback-induced change
22 within the creative revision process affects, and in turn is affected by, feedback
23 recipients' identities. Scholars have argued that individuals' self-concepts are at least
24 partly informed by psychological ownership over the objects of their work (Baer &
25 Brown, 2012; Rouse, 2013) and the socially-defined roles related to that work (e.g.,
26 inventors; Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009). Current theorizing related to
27 creative revision, however, does not focus on identity in the context of this process.
28 Instead, it focuses largely on the informational aspects of creative revision, whereby
29 individuals seek out feedback to help reduce environmental uncertainties and information
30 asymmetries that may cause others to challenge the presumed novelty and usefulness of
31 the ideas (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015). This neglects a
32 problem illustrated in the opening epigraphs and common to creative work, wherein
33 individuals are concerned by, if not resistant to, externally-imposed changes to their
34 creative ideas. These changes, while likely intended to increase an idea's viability, might
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3 paradoxically undermine it by challenging individuals' associated identity-based
4 relationships to their work. Consequently, although design thinking, business model
5 development, prototyping and lean startup practices have flourished as practical
6 templates for creative revision, insufficient theory exists about how individuals embrace
7 change originating from external sources without destabilizing their identities.
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15 The findings of this study highlight this overlooked aspect of the creative revision
16 process: the psychological ownership of ideas shapes how individuals respond to
17 feedback, requiring them to reconsider both their ideas and identities. Moreover, the
18 findings reveal the importance of collective sensemaking and individuals' prior creative
19 experience in further conditioning this process. The emergent model makes several
20 theoretical contributions that extend and challenge prior scholarship on both creative
21 work and founder identities. Most notably, the findings suggest that creative revision is a
22 process wherein founders or other creative workers attempt not only to advance the
23 novelty and usefulness of their ideas by aligning their work with external demands, but
24 also to retain a sense of self and subjective meaning. Practically, this insight is important
25 because it suggests that in order to increase the viability of creative outputs, participants
26 in the creative revision process must balance demands for adaptation with the need to
27 retain a coherent sense of self and purpose.
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44 **CREATIVE REVISION: ACCOUNTING FOR THE INTERSECTION OF IDEA** 45 **AND IDENTITY WORK** 46

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48 The processes of creative revision and identity reconstruction are ubiquitous and
49 important in the context of organizing. Although they are related, most researchers have
50 treated them as separate issues in prior scholarship. The former is largely understood to
51 entail *idea work*—efforts to enhance the novelty and usefulness of an idea (i.e., the
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3 cognitive representation of a creative solution) and its associated creative outputs
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5 (Carlsen, Clegg, & Gjersvik, 2012; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci,
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7 2015). Studies have increasingly examined how creative revision is socially embedded,
8
9 triggered and influenced by interactions between creative workers and external feedback
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11 providers rather than by ideas generated during isolated and independent brainstorming
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13 sessions (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Perry-Smith, 2006; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003).
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15 Such social interaction and feedback is common in organizations, particularly
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17 entrepreneurial startups (Perry-Smith & Coff, 2011; Rouse, 2013). The latter process,
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19 which involves efforts to reconstruct and present one's identity in ways that enhance self-
20
21 efficacy, is commonly labeled as *identity work* (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Pratt,
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23 Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Given individuals' tendencies under routine conditions
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25 to reinforce rather than proactively change existing identities (Burke & Reitzes, 1981,
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27 1991), the practices associated with identity work are again often understood to be
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29 triggered by external events or demands that destabilize individuals' identities (Beech,
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31 Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Koerner, 2014; Pratt et al., 2006).
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38 Beyond the obvious involvement of idea work in creative revision, frequent
39
40 external demands can destabilize not only perceptions of an idea's novelty and usefulness
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42 but also a creative worker's identity (Rouse, 2013). Although this process may
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44 simultaneously trigger both idea work and identity work, current theories of creative
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46 revision offer little insight into this potential practical and theoretical intersection.
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48 Specifically, there appear to be at least two potential practical tensions within the creative
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50 revision process. First, creative revision and the willingness to change an idea (i.e.,
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52 "pivot") can be impeded by connections to specific earlier versions of the idea (Crilly,
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3 2017). Second, feedback from resource providers can instigate idea-based change, which
4 may create a sense of loss for creative workers (Baer & Brown, 2012). These practical
5 tensions also illuminate the potential intersection between idea work and identity work. If
6 creative workers' connections to their ideas relate to their identities, resistance to idea-
7 based change might be expected, and so might the need to reformulate those identities in
8 the face of change. In the following sub-sections I review the existing research on
9 creative revision, noting how the important intersection between idea work and identity
10 work has received scant attention.
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21 **From Information Constraints to Identity Constraints**

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24 A primary concern motivating existing studies of creativity, particularly in
25 innovation and entrepreneurship contexts, is constraints that inhibit creative workers'
26 efforts to ensure the novelty and usefulness of their creative outputs (Anderson, Potočnik,
27 & Zhou, 2014; Baer, 2012). Researchers mostly assume that informational deficiencies
28 compromise the success of creative outputs, and focus on strategies for overcoming them.
29 Consequently, they focus on sources (e.g., mentors, weak ties) and practices (e.g.,
30 prototyping, networking) that might increase feedback quality, thereby bolstering creative
31 workers' access to information and improving the novelty and usefulness of ideas
32 (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Ozgen & Baron, 2007; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015; Sutton
33 & Hargadon, 1996).
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47 While this scholarly emphasis on the relationship between creative revision and
48 the novelty and usefulness of creative work is crucially important, in practice creative
49 work often is perceived as a highly personal endeavor rather than an instrumental one.
50 First, audiences are prone to evaluate and categorize not only creative ideas or
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3 prototypes, but also the creative potential of those who generate them (Elsbach &
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5 Kramer, 2003; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Second, creative workers often attach great
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7 weight to their own personal evaluations of and connections to an idea (Baer & Brown,
8
9 2012; Brown & Baer, 2015), which ultimately can be at odds with the instrumental goal
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11 of accommodating external feedback. Davies and Talbot (1987: 20), for example,
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13 conducted a series of interviews with the Royal Designers for Industry in the United
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15 Kingdom about their relationships to their ideas: “These designers described experiences
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17 in which they realised an idea was exactly right. It was the idea. It was not tentative...but
18
19 final. Realising the idea as a concrete object did not involve elaboration and validation of
20
21 a tentative idea.” The designers viewed the ideas as “theirs,” and offered their own
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23 appraisals of those ideas as “exactly right.” Given such personal evaluations, even
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25 feedback targeted at ideas or tasks rather than the people associated with them might be
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27 taken personally. This reaction may then become a constraint on the creative revision
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29 process, compromising the designers’ willingness to elaborate or validate their ideas,
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31 which would imply treating them instead as tentative “works in progress.”
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38 Two streams of research offer some initial insight into the basis of this
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40 constraint—namely, the literatures on psychological ownership and role identity. First,
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42 psychological ownership has been defined as “that state in which individuals feel as
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44 though the target of ownership (material or immaterial in nature) or a piece of it is
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46 ‘theirs’” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001: 299). According to this research, psychological
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48 ownership over an intangible or immaterial item such as a creative idea is likely to
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50 increase as one develops deeper knowledge about the idea, invests time and energy, and
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52 perceives control over it (Pierce et al., 2001). In developing such ownership, ideas can
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3 become viewed by creative workers as extensions of the self, contributing to their
4 identities and self-efficacy (Belk, 1988; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). Psychological
5 ownership thereby decreases individuals' willingness to relinquish control over those
6 ideas (Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005; Rouse, 2013). Hence, individuals'
7 psychological ownership of ideas might challenge their willingness to revise them in
8 response to external feedback.
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Second, research on role identities suggests that individuals internalize particular identity standards related to specific roles or positions within a social structure (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As an individual engages in activities associated with a particular role and becomes committed to the associated networks and relationships, the identity salience of that role increases (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). This in turn produces more consistent engagement with objects and activities typically associated with that role (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). For instance, in the context of entrepreneurship, individuals who view the role of inventor as salient to their identities are likely to consistently engage in and derive meaning and positive affect from the cognitive efforts involved in formulating entrepreneurial ideas. Cardon and her colleagues (2009: 520) argued that such positive affect linked to founders' enactment of identity-salient roles, which they labeled "entrepreneurial passion," might "limit an entrepreneur's creative problem solving" and make them "resistant to exploring alternative options." Thus, creative workers' commitments to particular role identities associated with creating new ideas may ultimately constrain the creative revision process.

Although these two literatures diverge in focus, they both offer arguments and evidence suggesting that individuals' self-concepts might constrain the creative revision

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3 process. Therefore, responding to demands to revise their ideas may require creative
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5 workers to resolve any consequent instability in their identities.
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7 **Creative Revision Amidst External Demands Requires Subsequent Identity Work**

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10 Although the literatures on creative revision and identity work have developed
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12 independently, both emphasize the importance of feedback along with external social
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14 conditions in triggering each of the respective processes. First, research on creative
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16 revision has exposed several different practices used by feedback providers to suggest
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18 changes to ideas or other creative inputs (Harrison & Rouse, 2015). Baer and Brown
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20 (2012) notably suggested that feedback varies in terms of both rhetorical content and
21
22 intentions relative to the creative ideas or inputs. Specifically, they argued that feedback
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24 can be *additive*, with suggestions to build on individuals' existing ideas, or *subtractive*,
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26 with suggestions to strip away elements of those ideas. The authors conducted two
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28 experiments in which they asked participants to develop a promotional strategy for a
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30 restaurant. In the scenario in which they proposed subtractive changes to the target
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32 customer segments, the participants with greater psychological ownership of the ideas
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34 experienced a strong sense of loss and negative affect.
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40 Research on identity work is similarly focused on the effects of externally-
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42 imposed change (Beech et al., 2012; Elsbach & Flynn, 2013; Kreiner et al., 2006).
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44 Studies in this area are grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner,
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46 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), wherein it is argued that
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48 individuals' personal identities (i.e., differentiating characteristics) are subject to potential
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50 tensions associated with the demands of their social identities (i.e., categorizations of the
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52 self into social groups; Brewer, 1991; Kreiner et al., 2006). When specific occupational
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3 demands or social conditions violate or threaten individuals' identities within the context
4 of their labor (Petriglieri, 2011), this is presumed to trigger a process of identity work,
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6 allowing individuals to "come to terms with" those violations, often by way of small
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8 adjustments to how they make sense of their identities *vis-à-vis* the infringing social
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10 conditions (Pratt et al., 2006). Within the context of creative work, for example, Elsbach
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12 (2009) studied designers, whose activities were constantly constrained by their corporate
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14 employers. She found that the designers engaged in identity work, developing individual
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16 creative or "signature" styles that enabled them to retain their distinctiveness despite
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18 corporate constraints and pressures for conformity.
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24 Taken together, these separate research streams establish the importance of both
25
26 idea work and identity work within the context of the creative process. While no studies
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28 to date have considered the two types of work in tandem, related studies seem to support
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30 the premise that when changes to ideas are externally imposed, identity work is likely to
31
32 be required of individuals who regard aspects of those ideas as salient to their identities.
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34 To develop new theory, researchers must explore this intersection to illustrate how ideas
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36 change in response to feedback and how these changes affect creative workers' identities.
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38 In this study, I consider how idea work shapes identity work; in doing so, I also consider
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40 the feedback context and creative workers' experience-based differences that contribute
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42 to variations in this process.
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47 RESEARCH METHODS

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49 Given the lack of existing research at the intersection of idea and identity work, I
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51 used an inductive, grounded theory approach (Fendt & Sachs, 2008; Locke, 2001; Strauss
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53 & Corbin, 1990). This approach is well suited for understanding how founders "go about
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3 constructing and understanding their experiences” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013: 16)
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5 as they encounter difficult feedback, change their ideas, and reconsider their identity-
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7 based relationships to their creative work.
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10 **Sampling**

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12 I conducted an extensive 8-month field study of 59 founders and their feedback
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14 providers, using data from serial interviews, non-participant observations, and archival
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16 documentation. I relied on purposive sampling (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) because I was
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18 primarily concerned with identifying sites and study participants most likely to reveal
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20 instances wherein (a) idea-based change was instigated by external sources, and (b) the
21
22 affected ideas were likely to be deemed salient to the identities of the creative workers.
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24 With regard to site selection, I initially identified contexts that offered the most efficient
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26 access to frequent and consequential feedback interactions between resource-constrained
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28 founders and potential resource providers. As such, I negotiated access to two
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30 entrepreneurial incubators (both in the same region of the United States) with
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32 concentrated pools of resource-constrained founders who were gathering feedback about
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34 their ideas while attempting to find the resources to commercialize them.
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40 Within these contexts, I sought out founders who were actively pursuing feedback
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42 and capital investment opportunities, and who were early enough in the
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44 commercialization process (e.g., pre-revenue, pre-capital investment) that feedback was
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46 particularly meaningful, since it often was couched within the context of resource
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48 acquisition. I also selected founders who had been directly involved in generating the
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50 ideas and launching the ventures they were pursuing, since such direct involvement can
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52 lead to high levels of psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001). For ventures with
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3 founding teams, I treated each founder as a separate case. In other words, while I also
4 attended to possible effects of peer-group dynamics on the process of creative revision,
5 my analytical unit of analysis was the founder and his or her practices.
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10 My primary sample was comprised of 26 ongoing incubator residents who I
11 observed and interviewed frequently. When I started my study, 15 of these participants
12 had just been accepted into a 14-week program designed to accelerate customer
13 development and capital acquisition. I was thus able to observe and interview these
14 founders throughout the entire course of their involvement with the incubator.
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21 Having been granted access to the incubators' documentation, I selected another
22 28 founders affiliated with (but who had not applied to be residents of) the incubators. As
23 such, their interactions with the incubators were limited to irregular mentorship sessions
24 with domain experts associated with the incubators. To further test whether incubator
25 involvement of any sort was an important boundary condition, I also used convenience
26 sampling to select five more founders with no exposure to the incubators and with whom
27 I was personally familiar. In all of these cases, selection criteria mirrored those for the
28 primary sample, ensuring that founders from both my primary and secondary samples
29 were exposed to similar types of feedback with similar stakes. These additional
30 participants described feelings of ownership over their creative ideas (i.e., "my idea"),
31 providing evidence to support and further develop insights from the incubator context.
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50 Thus, I opted to include this sample and the additional data I collected as a part of my
51 overall analysis of the creative revision process.

51 **Data Collection**

52 I engaged in triangulated data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Eisenhardt,
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3 1989; Yin, 2009) using three different sources: semi-structured interviews, observations,
4 and documentation. I conducted 103 interviews with an average duration of 30 minutes.
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6 During these interviews, I focused on surfacing the participants' experiences related to
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8 idea development, feedback interactions, and subsequent changes to their ideas, as well
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10 as their ongoing relationships to their creative work.
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15 While the interviews provided indirect access to multiple accounts of feedback
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17 across the primary and secondary samples, most direct observations of feedback involved
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19 the primary sample of founders in residence at the incubators. Specifically, I observed 17
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21 pitch events as well as 10 private (i.e., closed-door) and 5 semi-private (i.e., within public
22
23 meeting space) mentoring sessions, resulting in over 3 months-worth of field notes and
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25 36 hours of recorded and transcribed audio files. Finally, I collected 213 pages of notes
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27 taken by mentors during their feedback interactions with founders from both the primary
28
29 and secondary samples, 20 pages of qualitative peer evaluations, six business plans, eight
30
31 pitch decks and sundry marketing collateral and business modeling artifacts. I gathered
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33 this documentation to ensure that I was not missing any important "behind the scenes"
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35 interactions. Founders in the primary sample relied heavily on a tool called the "Business
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37 Model Canvas" (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), which enabled them to document their
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39 assumptions about how their entrepreneurial ideas would create value. Thus, I was able to
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41 capture data on the evolution of the founders' ideas and underlying assumptions. Table 1
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43 outlines the various data collection methods and the consequent data inventory.
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49 ***Insert Table 1 About Here***
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51 **Data Analysis**

52 I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method consistent with Strauss
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3 and Corbin (1990) as well as Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). First, I used the terms
4 frequently employed by participants during both observations and interviews to surface
5 first-order codes (Van Maanen, 1979). For instance, the first-order codes related to
6 changes in the ideas included words and phrases which conveyed both the degree of
7 change as well as specific aspects requiring revision (e.g., “overhaul the model” vs.
8 “tweak the cost structure”). During this phase, I also coded words and phrases that
9 deepened my understanding of the feedback context, such as rhetorical differences in the
10 feedback, forum type (e.g., public or private), the number of people in attendance, and
11 whether or not the founders discussed their feedback with peers following the session.
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24 Once the first-order coding efforts failed to reveal additional unique terms and
25 references of potential importance, I concluded that I had reached data saturation.
26 Specifically, each of the first-order codes included in later stages of my analysis were
27 present in at least five of the 59 observed cases, providing numerous examples from
28 which to engage in axial coding. This second step of axial coding involved comparing
29 similar first-order codes (e.g., references to “my idea,” as well as personal narratives that
30 conveyed a sense of control over an idea or investments of time, energy, and values into
31 it). This step enabled me to surface the characteristics of broader categories of data
32 known as second-order themes. Each of the second-order themes included in my final
33 analysis were present in at least 11 of the 59 observed cases, again providing numerous
34 examples from which to understand the steps involved in the creative revision process.
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49 Finally, the third step involved attempts to refine the categories and themes into a
50 model of creative revision that accounted for tensions between changes in the ideas and
51 founders’ relationships to those ideas, as well as the overarching feedback context. This
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3 step in the analysis is known as selective coding, and the aim is to identify relationships
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5 between different core categories. In this step, I engaged in “temporal bracketing”
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7 (Langley, 1999), whereby I segmented feedback episodes and clustered them by founder.
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9 Such an approach improves comparison and replication for theory building purposes
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11 (Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011). Each episode thus comprised the initial
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13 feedback, subsequent efforts to process and make sense of that feedback, and practices
14
15 aimed at revising the founder’s idea and identity. Such temporal bracketing enabled me to
16
17 understand the sequential arrangement of steps in this process and the mechanisms
18
19 connecting them. Clustering these episodes by founder, I was then able to perceive how
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21 these “discrete but connected blocks” (Langley, 1999: 703) highlighted patterns within
22
23 each case as well as across cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Table 2 presents these
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25 and other patterns *across* my cases, which supplement my in-depth analyses *within* cases
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27 and lead to further insights about the relationships between the various themes.
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33 *** Insert Table 2 About Here ***
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35 For instance, 26 participants in my sample were incubator residents and 29 were part of
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37 co-founding teams. As I explored the contextual differences between founders in my
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39 sample, I found the collective sensemaking which ensued after feedback exchanges to be
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41 among the critical factors shaping founders’ reappraisals of psychological ownership.
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43 Following Corley and Gioia’s (2004) illustrative visualization of qualitative data
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45 structures, Figure 1 highlights the relationships between the final first-order concepts,
46
47 second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions that emerged from my analysis.
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RESEARCH FINDINGS

To situate the reporting of findings related to the inductive model surfaced in this study, I begin this section by providing evidence of the founders' initial ideas and their identity-based connections to particular facets of those ideas as well as to the inventor role. I then discuss the feedback that triggered the identity-informed process of creative revision. The main focus of the findings section is oriented toward highlighting the entrepreneurs' responses—how they reappraised their psychological ownership of ideas, the constraints this imposed on subsequent idea and identity work, and effects on the ability to achieve a sense of optimal distinctiveness within the local entrepreneurial community. Table 3 provides additional evidence for each of these themes, and Figure 2 illustrates the observed relationships comprising the emergent model.

*** Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 About Here ***

Entrepreneurs and Their Ideas

Upon meeting the participants in my study, I first asked them to tell me about their ideas. Their responses suggested that it was very difficult for them to convey their ideas to me or others without referencing personal experiences. The entrepreneurs consistently referred to particular moments in time, in which the ideas were “sparked” or “birthed.” One first-time entrepreneur in the digital media space employed both metaphors as he described the conception of his entrepreneurial idea:

So, this was the original spark for the idea...Just having this moment of recognizing that people all over the world had the same challenge...That was sort

1
2
3 of the birth of this. (F27)²
4

5 Regardless of the origins, the entrepreneurs regarded these ideas not just as
6
7 creative projects tied to abstract economic opportunities, but as reflections of their
8
9 personal values and beliefs, which ultimately contributed to a sense of psychological
10
11 ownership. The same founder, for example, reflected on how the idea and even the
12
13 industry needed to appeal to him on a deep, personal level for him to truly feel like the
14
15 project was worthwhile:
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17

18
19 I wasn't about to start a biomedical or an aerospace company, or something that I
20
21 wasn't passionate about. It had to be something that I believed in. It had to be an
22
23 idea I could call my own. (F27)
24
25

26 When I pushed for clarification, founders indicated that they viewed their
27
28 proposed solutions—and by extension, the specific problems they had identified—as core
29
30 to their ideas, and thus personally meaningful. An interview exchange with a different
31
32 entrepreneur illustrates this:
33
34

35 *F18*: If it's just interesting, that's not enough. You don't want to go to war for
36
37 something that's just interesting. You want to go to war for something that...is
38
39 kind of core to how you see the world.
40
41

42 *Interviewer*: So, what is it about your idea that you perceive to be core to how you
43
44 see the world?
45
46

47 *F18*: Well, I think it starts with the solution that I am proposing for specific
48
49 problems that I see with the delivery and provision of health care today.
50
51

52 For all entrepreneurs in the sample, it was clear that while psychological
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56 ² This citation convention identifies founders in correspondence with Table 2.
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1
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3 ownership of their ideas positively compelled their creative work, such ownership also
4
5 had the potential to constrain their ability to respond to feedback. One mentor who had
6
7 delivered feedback to many entrepreneurs summarized this constraint:
8
9

10 You know, [many founders] have got very fixed ideas about what's right and
11
12 wrong with the world and they're not going to compromise their values so that
13
14 some investor can just make money. They're after the purity of their ideas.
15
16

17 **Identity-sharpening Feedback Practices**

18
19 Identity-sharpening feedback practices introduce a tension between creative
20
21 workers' psychological ownership of their ideas and socially-informed standards for
22
23 creative output. Specifically, such feedback discounts the entrepreneurs' creative ideas as
24
25 either too different from creative standards or too similar to ideas that have already been
26
27 tested or established. For example, during the first pitch session I attended, one feedback
28
29 provider suggested that the idea diverged too far from his creative standards, remarking:
30
31 "I really don't understand the value proposition. I need to know what the customer
32
33 problem is that you're trying to solve, and this is not remotely clear at this point." In
34
35 another instance, a different feedback provider told a team of entrepreneurs that their idea
36
37 too closely resembled ideas underpinning several already successful companies, stating:
38
39 "[Your competitors] seem to already have a strong foothold on this emerging market and
40
41 there are several other players as well."
42
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47 Although the identity-sharpening feedback practices I observed exclusively
48
49 targeted the creative ideas rather than the entrepreneurs, such practices primed founders'
50
51 identity-based connections to their ideas by introducing reflected appraisals (i.e.,
52
53 information individuals perceive about themselves from others; Burke, 1991) that
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3 diverged from their own self-concepts. One entrepreneur explained:
4

5 It feels like sorority rush all over again, where they're making sweeping
6
7 judgments about whether we belong here based on superficial details or a 30-
8
9 second conversation. It's hard not to take that personally, when I know they're not
10
11 understanding me or where we're coming from. (F14)
12
13

14 As such, these divergent creative standards and reflected appraisals that surfaced
15
16 during the feedback process encouraged creative workers to not only revise their ideas,
17
18 but also reflect on their identities. In this setting, such feedback practices contrasted with
19
20 practices such as dialogic problem solving, which were less likely to trigger an identity-
21
22 informed revision process.
23
24

25 26 **Psychological Ownership Reappraisal** 27

28 Following identity-sharpening feedback, entrepreneurs reappraised their
29
30 psychological ownership in three different ways. First, several entrepreneurs reaffirmed
31
32 psychological ownership of their ideas. Following a pitch session at one of the
33
34 incubators, for example, I sat down with a founder to discuss the feedback he had
35
36 received. He compared the feedback environment to the one depicted on a popular reality
37
38 television show involving aspiring founders and angel investors:
39
40

41 Sometimes when I go there I feel like I'm on *Shark Tank*—you know, the TV
42
43 show. [laughter] It's like one person stands up and torpedoes your idea and then
44
45 everyone else smells blood and decides they want a piece. You saw it. [One
46
47 potential investor] was basically, like, "Don't quit your day job, because this is
48
49 going nowhere," and then [another potential investor] saw that as an opportunity
50
51 to pile on...But they're all just saying the same thing. And I'm just standing there
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3 thinking, “I’ve got a good idea! Just because you guys can’t see what I see,
4
5 doesn’t mean my idea isn’t going to work.” (F16)
6

7
8 Likewise, I met with another founder several days after he received identity-sharpening
9
10 feedback, wherein feedback providers questioned the need for the business he was
11
12 proposing. This was the founder’s first entrepreneurial venture, and although he had
13
14 already assembled a development team, during the early weeks he processed feedback in
15
16 isolation before involving team members. He explained:
17
18

19 So, I got to a point of almost feeling kind of desperate or lost, and I just got all my
20
21 team together off site, and I laid out what we were going to accomplish in those 3
22
23 hours. We were going to return to the original idea. We were going to talk about
24
25 everything that inspires us about our idea, why we’re involved, and why we’ve
26
27 been giving ourselves to this to date. (F1)
28
29

30
31 These quotes illustrate founders’ efforts to reaffirm psychological ownership of their
32
33 ideas after receiving identity-sharpening feedback.
34

35 Other entrepreneurs responded to identity-sharpening feedback by reflecting on
36
37 “what is core to the idea,” thereby reappraising their psychological ownership by way of
38
39 abstraction. In one particularly illustrative case, a first-time entrepreneur and self-
40
41 described “creative” explained how the initial idea had served as a source of excitement
42
43 for him, stating “You gotta be crazy to become an entrepreneur, so I think it was actually
44
45 kind of important that I got wrapped up in our original idea, because without that
46
47 excitement, there’s no way I would be doing this” (F9)! Subsequently, he described a
48
49 feedback exchange that led him to reconsider his idea and its importance, ultimately
50
51 abstracting out to the “bigger problem:”
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3 So essentially, he told us that he couldn't see what was new about our idea...And
4
5 the more we discussed it as a team, the more I was convinced we needed to
6
7 change, but it was hard to let go. Which is kind of strange, now that I'm talking
8
9 about it. But that's when we started thinking, y'know, that really what we care
10
11 about is the bigger problem we're trying to solve. That's why we're doing this.
12
13

14 Finally, a third group of entrepreneurs viewed the creative revision process
15
16 metaphorically, using terms like the "game" or "sport" of entrepreneurship (F4; F50;
17
18 F23). Framing the process in this way enabled them to embrace the philosophy espoused
19
20 by many of the feedback providers—that attachment to one's ideas is an obstacle to the
21
22 creative revision process. Consequently, they relinquished any previous psychological
23
24 ownership of their ideas. For instance, one entrepreneur who had worked in the music
25
26 industry but was attempting to launch a company in the health care sector decided to sit
27
28 down with several of his peers within the incubator to discuss the identity-sharpening
29
30 feedback he had received the previous day. At the end of the conversation, he described
31
32 how his relationship to his ideas had evolved:

33
34
35 I can see why people get disheartened early on in this process and quit. I mean
36
37 you start out and the idea feels magical, and then you expose it to light and the
38
39 magic fades. And that's certainly happened with me...I need to start looking at
40
41 these ideas as hypotheses that need testing, and then figure out what works and
42
43 what doesn't. (F19)
44
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48

49 Several entrepreneurs were quick to relinquish psychological ownership of their ideas in
50
51 the face of identity-sharpening feedback, and instead embrace an understanding of their
52
53 ideas as tentative speculations or evolving components of the overall process.
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Idea Work and Identity Work Within the Creative Revision Process

As illustrated in Figure 2, these three different approaches to reappraising one's psychological ownership of a creative idea—reaffirming, abstracting or relinquishing—allowed for different combinations of idea work, which involves updating both the content of a creative idea (i.e., structural idea work) and the presentation of that idea (i.e., rhetorical idea work). Specifically, entrepreneurs reevaluated various assumptions underpinning their ideas such as value propositions, customers, key activities, marketing channels and relationships, strategic partnerships, resources, cost structures, revenue streams, and strategies related to market entry and growth. However, they approached this process differently in terms of (a) which structural elements were revised, (b) how they were revised, and (c) how the revisions were communicated. I labeled the three observed idea work practices as *defending*, *repairing* and *re-engineering* based on the comprehensiveness of the revision efforts. More comprehensive forms of idea work (e.g., re-engineering) at times also included less comprehensive forms of idea work. As illustrated in Figure 2, these different combinations of idea work encouraged particular identity work practices to clarify the relationships between their self-concepts and culturally-based conceptions of the founder role.³ Since idea work introduced varying degrees of divergence between feedback recommendations and actual revisions, this work also potentially introduced discrepancies between the entrepreneurs' self-conceptualizations and external role expectations.

On one hand, the entrepreneurs were exposed to an increasingly espoused

³ Although prior research has asserted *a priori* definitions of the founder role involving expectations associated with commercializing and exploiting opportunities (Cardon et al., 2009), this study reveals multiple competing culturally-based conceptions of the founder role which specify how individuals should commercialize and exploit opportunities.

1
2
3 depiction of the “scientific founder” role which emphasized opportunity
4 commercialization and exploitation by: (a) treating ideas as hypotheses, (b) developing
5 prototypes or “minimum viable products,” (c) “getting outside the building” to interact
6 with critics so as to refine the hypotheses, and (d) “pivoting” in response to rejection. The
7 scientific founder role was explicitly championed by all of the resource providers,
8 mentors and incubator administrators, and further reinforced by circulated literature and
9 artifacts, including *The Lean Startup* (Ries, 2011), *Business Model Generation*
10 (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), and *The Four Steps to the Epiphany* (Blank, 2003). One
11 investor explained: “If [the entrepreneurs] come in and say, ‘This is my baby and it’s
12 beautiful and by God I’m going to sell it to the world,’ and if they remain passionate
13 about that tactic, that manifestation, they’re probably not an entrepreneur.”

14
15 On the other hand, entrepreneurs were exposed to an equally prominent, yet
16 competing conception—the “visionary founder” role. This latter conception alternatively
17 emphasized commercializing and exploiting opportunities by: (a) protecting against the
18 fragility of entrepreneurial genius and passion, (b) convincing skeptics by the force of
19 one’s conviction, and (c) persisting in response to misunderstanding or rejection.

20
21 Although expectations associated with the visionary founder role explicitly contradict
22 those associated with the scientific founder role, entrepreneurs were able to find and cite
23 convenient archetypes—most notably, Steve Jobs and Richard Branson—who succeeded
24 by persisting rather than pivoting when confronted with negative feedback. In direct
25 contrast to the aforementioned investor’s sentiments, Richard Branson said: “When you
26 believe in something, the force of your convictions will spark other people’s interest and
27 motivate them to help you achieve your goals. This is essential to success” (Clarkson,
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3 2015). This visionary founder role thus discourages entrepreneurs from treating their
4
5 ideas as hypotheses or pivoting amidst rejection.
6

7
8 In response to these competing conceptions of the founder role, entrepreneurs
9
10 took three different approaches to identity work: *transcending*, *decoupling* and
11
12 *professionalizing*. In the following subsections, I draw from the compiled vignettes of the
13
14 founders in my sample to illustrate how differences in the psychological ownership
15
16 reappraisal process affected their subsequent idea and identity work.
17
18

19 ***Defending and transcending.*** By reaffirming psychological ownership of their
20
21 ideas in response to feedback, some entrepreneurs narrowed the attention and intentions
22
23 of their revision efforts, treating most changes as personal compromises. Although
24
25 mentors had suggested significant changes to the ideas, these founders were unwilling to
26
27 implement them and instead adopted a *defending* approach to idea work as they engaged
28
29 in efforts to clarify, justify and expand the assumptions underpinning their creative ideas.
30
31
32

33 For instance, after observing several feedback exchanges, I sat down with the
34
35 founder of a social media company (F16) to discuss changes he had implemented and
36
37 take photos of his evolving business model canvas. The changes illustrate the defending
38
39 idea work practice. Specifically, this founder continued to add to his business model over
40
41 time, listing several new marketing channels, critical activities and key partnerships. This
42
43 model included the initial customer segment, but specified it as a “sub-segment” of a
44
45 broader intended customer group. In addition to these efforts to broaden the original idea,
46
47 the founder used a spreadsheet to track additional details and supporting arguments. Each
48
49 row of the spreadsheet represented a section of the business model canvas, and each
50
51 column offered space to record additional notes and details about his understanding of the
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3 idea. When I asked him why he kept such detailed notes about the various components of
4
5 the business model, the founder responded:

6
7
8 *F16*: A number of the challenges I faced early on were related to a lack of clarity.

9
10 While I'm still not concerned what everybody thinks about the idea right now, I
11
12 think it's important for me to be clear about how I'm going to pull this off. So,
13
14 I've been using this spreadsheet just as a way to get clear...Any time I hear an
15
16 argument about why this won't work, I can then respond with these details. And if
17
18 it's something I haven't heard before, then I can come back and update the
19
20 spreadsheet.
21
22

23
24 *Interviewer*: Why do you feel it's important to defend your ideas?
25

26
27 *F16*: For an idea to be good, it has to be new. I believe what I'm trying to do is
28
29 new, and this means it's confusing to a lot of people. So, I feel like I have to fight
30
31 sometimes to make people see the value in my ideas.
32

33 This quote illustrates how a detailed spreadsheet became a tool that helped this founder
34
35 clarify and justify various aspects of his business model canvas. Moreover, it illustrates
36
37 how the individual's psychological ownership of the idea restricted the focus of his
38
39 creative revision process, contributing to his choice to engage in defending.
40
41

42 Since the scientific founder role frequently prescribed within incubators asserts
43
44 the value of "pivoting" throughout the creative process, entrepreneurs who engaged in
45
46 defending practices experienced dissonance between their self-concepts and this
47
48 prescribed role. Thus, in light of the restricted idea work and their intact psychological
49
50 ownership, these entrepreneurs rejected the scientific founder role and increased their
51
52 identification with the visionary founder role. Specifically, they adopted a *transcending*
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3 approach to identity work by increasing their identification with roles that portray
4 creative work as non-formulaic (e.g., the visionary founder role). These entrepreneurs
5 rejected roles they viewed as prescribing an overly-formulaic approach to
6 commercializing business ideas in favor of roles that encourage wherewithal and
7 persistence, as illustrated in the following two excerpts. In the first excerpt, one founder
8 who had previously responded to feedback by reaffirming his psychological ownership
9 described how he was attempting to move beyond the “reductionist” model of
10 entrepreneurship prescribed by the incubator in favor of one that emphasized “fighting
11 for a better future.”
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24 This is why I can't get behind the reductionist mindset of MVPs, pivoting, and the
25 like. When I look at successful founders like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark
26 Zuckerberg, they envisioned a possible future that others couldn't see or didn't
27 want to see and then they had the wherewithal to make it real...As an entrepreneur,
28 this is what defines me—I am envisioning and fighting for a better future. (F22)
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35 Another entrepreneur echoed these thoughts, using the metaphor of the ugly duckling to
36 illustrate how he viewed himself as a “swan” because his idea had greater and longer-
37 term potential:
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41
42 I'm at a point with my company—it's the ugly duckling story, as far as I can tell,
43 in that I'm not like these other entrepreneurs. Yet I still believe I'm more of a
44 swan. I believe I'm a swan, because the potential here is objectively greater than
45 those companies here that are looking for early wins. This idea is going to take
46 time, and a lot of folks here are not interested in ideas that take time. (F25)
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54 These two examples illustrate how defending encouraged entrepreneurs to embrace the
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3 visionary founder role as a basis for persisting despite rejection.
4

5 ***Repairing and decoupling.*** Founders who abstracted the psychological ownership
6
7 of their ideas increased the degree of flexibility in the creative revision process by
8
9 allowing for more substantial shifts in the underpinning assumptions as long as the
10
11 broadly-framed value proposition and the associated proposed solutions remained intact.
12
13 As such, they engaged in both the aforementioned defending practice as well as the more
14
15 comprehensive idea work practice of *repairing*. Specifically, repairing can be understood
16
17 as idea work that accommodates feedback by questioning the value of specific features of
18
19 the idea and narrowing the focus of the original assumptions or replacing some of the less
20
21 essential (i.e., non-core) aspects of the idea (e.g., peripheral mechanics). In one case, a
22
23 team of founders started with an idea for a mobile health care application that was
24
25 sweeping in terms of both scope (e.g., the range of services offered within the mobile
26
27 application) and scale (e.g., mass-market, direct to consumer). Initial feedback challenged
28
29 both the market viability of the idea and the feasibility of delivering on such a large-scale
30
31 endeavor. During team discussions, the founders began to actively consider alternatives
32
33 to some underpinning assumptions. They juxtaposed ideas on a spreadsheet which they
34
35 used to inform conversations. In one such conversation, one of the founders admitted: “I
36
37 think [the feedback providers] have a point. A high volume, low margin strategy like this
38
39 might have some difficulty in such a saturated market” (F14).
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47 Such questioning of the idea was common within the context of the repairing
48
49 practice. Over the course of 3 months, the founders made a number of significant changes
50
51 to the initial idea, which illustrate the repairing idea work practice. Most notably, while
52
53 the value proposition and solution remained the same, they replaced their mass-market,
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3 direct-to-consumer approach with a business-to-business marketing strategy focused on
4 transactions with lower volume, but higher margin.
5
6

7
8 Repairing idea work allowed for some partial overlap between the suggested and
9
10 actual revisions. The entrepreneurs perceived that they were embracing revision efforts in
11 principled ways that enhanced the feasibility of the idea while remaining consistent with
12 their original intentions. Such idea work enabled these entrepreneurs to demonstrate an
13 appreciation for the scientific founder role without increasing their identification with the
14 role—a form of identity work which I label *decoupling*. They viewed the role as a hat
15 that could be worn if and when it was deemed necessary. This is similar to the practice
16 described in Kreiner et al.'s (2006) study of identity work among priests, whereby
17 individuals distinguish between the priesthood as something they *do* versus something
18 they *are*. During an interview exchange, one founder expressed this as follows:
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31 *Interviewer*: So, the incubator process has shaped the idea?
32

33 *F15*: Well, it's important to note that yes, the idea has changed, but we've made
34 these changes in very principled ways...I've come to realize that I don't really
35 care about the pretense of this startup culture and what it means to be successful
36 in this environment. So, I recognize that I have to put on the founder hat when I
37 pitch on Thursdays, but that's not what I'm ultimately about or why I'm here.
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44 This interaction thus illustrates how perceptions of principled idea revision can lead to an
45 instrumental approach to accepting and rejecting roles. In other words, when the “founder
46 hat” was necessary to convey legitimacy, entrepreneurs put it on, yet did not closely
47 identify with it.
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53 Other cases across my sample similarly illustrate these practices and how they
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3 relate to one another. By abstracting their psychological ownership, founders felt
4
5 increasingly willing to make “hard” changes that dramatically narrowed core aspects of
6
7 their ideas. One founder (F1) started with an idea which involved broad ambitions to
8
9 “connect the creative class to local opportunities, particularly labor opportunities,” but
10
11 subsequently narrowed his value proposition and focused on smaller sub-segments of
12
13 customers and “opportunities” that no longer included connecting individuals with jobs.
14
15 This founder noted how his efforts to philosophically distinguish between his original
16
17 idea and his broader vision enabled him to break down and rebuild his idea while
18
19 decoupling from the founder role he was “playing:”
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23
24 I was caught up originally in an idea—y’know, idea with a small “i,” and people
25
26 were critiquing that idea from different angles, and rightfully so. But what’s
27
28 important is that I haven’t lost sight of our idea with a big “I”...[You must]
29
30 distance yourself from that story and have a hard look at it and realize that it’s not
31
32 real. The story itself isn’t real; it’s a tool. And your identification with that story,
33
34 the character that you’re playing in it also isn’t real. I think there are ways of
35
36 deepening the story and making it more real for more people, constantly breaking
37
38 it down and rebuilding it. (F1)
39
40
41

42 ***Re-engineering and professionalizing.*** By relinquishing prior psychological
43
44 ownership of their ideas, entrepreneurs maximized flexibility in subsequent revision
45
46 processes. Without any strong commitment to prior ideas, these entrepreneurs were able
47
48 to broaden their attention and intentions and actively incorporate feedback, even in cases
49
50 where doing so entailed wholesale replacement of core components of their ideas. As
51
52 such, they engaged not only in defending and repairing practices, but also the most
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3 comprehensive idea work practice, *re-engineering*, defined as fully incorporating
4 feedback and replacing the key assumptions underpinning creative ideas. For example,
5 after receiving identity-sharpening feedback, one founder understood that “it was
6 important to recognize that [he is] not the expert, and so it makes total sense to loosen
7 [his] grip on the idea” (F19). He and his technical co-founder primarily employed the re-
8 engineering practice by leveraging connections in the incubator to arrange meetings with
9 a number of local business leaders, and considering potential gaps in employee health
10 coverage. As a result, the founders decided to revise their ideas to focus on corporate
11 wellness services, scrapping their entire original business model in the process. The
12 founder explained:
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26 Ideas are a dime a dozen. What we do now is that any time one of us has a new
27 suggestion, we immediately document it, and then we start writing down
28 everything that’s wrong with that suggestion. I realize this might not be the typical
29 way to do things, but it ensures that only the best suggestions survive. (F19)
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35 Criticizing ideas and replacing core components typify the idea work practice of re-
36 engineering. By shifting from viewing their ideas as ends in and of themselves, and
37 towards viewing them as means for establishing a successful company, the founders
38 perceived unlimited creative discretion as they revised their ideas.
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44 By incorporating all feedback, they not only aligned their ideas with external
45 advice, but also identified with the qualities that characterize the prescribed scientific
46 founder role. I label this identity work practice *professionalizing*, given its emphasis on
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3 increasing identification with roles that portray creative work as formulaic.⁴ For instance,
4
5 one founder described what he had found personally meaningful during the process:

7
8 *F6:* At the beginning, I would say that I didn't know what I didn't know, and so at
9
10 that time I got into this somewhat naively, but the reason I did was because I was
11
12 really excited about the idea. Pretty quickly I realized that the idea wasn't going
13
14 to work, but that's when my faith in the process of customer development started
15
16 to kick in. So right now, I think I derive the most meaning through the community
17
18 and through the struggle of becoming a great entrepreneur...

19
20
21 *Interviewer:* When you said you "derived meaning from becoming a great
22
23 entrepreneur" what did you mean?

24
25
26 *F6:* Yeah, so I mean basically everything we've been taught here—I've bought in.
27
28 I think a great entrepreneur is one that can take any idea, break it apart, and revise
29
30 it until it works...And that's basically how I see myself now—someone who can
31
32 build businesses by testing assumptions and figuring out what's generating the
33
34 most revenue.
35
36

37 **How Collective Sensemaking and Prior Experience Shape the Creative Revision**

38 **Process**

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42 To this point, I have described three different paths through the creative revision
43
44 process, entailing different forms of psychological ownership reappraisal, idea work and
45
46 identity work. Why did entrepreneurs take different paths through this process? My
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52 ⁴ My usage of the professionalizing label is consistent with studies in organization theory, which have
53 explored how broader cultural beliefs and rules can encourage formulaic practices in specific occupations
54 (e.g., Lounsbury, 2007). Interestingly, although entrepreneurship has not traditionally been considered a
55 profession from a formal academic standpoint, the ubiquity of emergent entrepreneurial standards and
56 institutions which uphold those standards suggests that it is increasingly apt to think of it as such.
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3 analysis suggests that entrepreneurs' relative embrace of collective sensemaking and
4 differences in their creative experience play a critical role in shaping the creative revision
5
6 process.
7
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9
10 ***Collective sensemaking.*** After receiving identity-sharpening feedback,
11 entrepreneurs entered a processing phase, either individually or collectively. In the
12 sample, 29 founders were part of a co-founding team and 26 were residents in an
13 incubator. These different groups were important to the creative revision process, in that
14 they allowed for collective sensemaking about the feedback and about the process of
15 creative revision. Specifically, founders and their peers (e.g., other founders of similar
16 status and with similar social experiences) within the incubators affected the creative
17 revision process by increasing dialogue about the ideas and the feedback. Such dialogue
18 affected entrepreneurs' attention to the feedback (e.g., by causing them to "think twice"
19 about the advice) as well as their intentions, encouraging a pragmatic (e.g., outcome-
20 oriented) rather than idealistic (e.g., values-oriented) and typically defensive response. By
21 the very act of discussing challenging feedback, co-founding teams conferred a certain
22 degree of legitimacy to it which enabled members of the team to reconsider its merits. As
23 team members opened up to each other about questions they had regarding their ideas and
24 exposed opportunities for compromise, founders also became more willing to alter or
25 relinquish their psychological ownership. During an internal group meeting between two
26 co-founders, I observed how the discussion shaped their attention and intentions as they
27 reflected pragmatically on the usefulness of the feedback and the need for revision:
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51 *F15:* Okay, we've been going around in circles here for the past hour, but I think
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53 the main point is that we need a better investable story and our original idea is too
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3 unfocused at this point.
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5 *F14:* We have to pivot, no question, and as much as I hate to admit, I think [the
6 potential investor's] suggestion about focusing on [a narrower understanding of
7 the value proposition] is useful.
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12 *F15:* And in some ways I don't view this as a massive change. I mean in essence
13 this is still what we set out to do; it's just kind of a more manageable version of
14 our value proposition.
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18
19 By definition, collective sensemaking also increased entrepreneurs' exposure to
20 others who were responding to feedback by engaging in idea work and identity work.
21
22 Such exposure tended to affect the relationship between idea and identity work in two
23 different ways. First, it helped to clarify the scientific and visionary founder roles,
24 thereby compressing the time between idea work and identity work. In other words, these
25 peer-based interactions enabled them to more swiftly understand the perceived
26 requirements associated with each role and thus begin to shift their identification. One
27 entrepreneur, for instance, expressed how his interactions with other entrepreneurs helped
28 refine his understanding of role expectations: "What's interesting is that many of us are
29 really just learning what it means to be an entrepreneur... So, for me the best education
30 just has been spending time with other entrepreneurs" (F11). Second, through increased
31 exposure to similar entrepreneurs and their feedback responses, collective sensemaking
32 tended to reinforce the relationship between specific identity work practices and idea
33 work practices. Because entrepreneurs tended to engage in collective sensemaking with
34 peers based on their corresponding identification, their interactions thus encouraged
35 mimetic adoption and validation of similar idea and identity work practices over time.
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3 ***Breadth of creative work experience.*** In addition to differences in peer group
4 involvement, I identified differences in the breadth of creative work experience among
5 founders in the sample. While some had highly diversified creative experiences launching
6 companies across industries and creative fields (e.g., one founder had launched
7 companies in the textiles, sports entertainment and media industries) others had more
8 specialized experience (e.g., another founder launched a company in the industry in
9 which he had specialized for over 20 years) or rather limited creative work experience.
10 Founders with more diversified prior experience, for instance, tended to be more
11 receptive to identity-sharpening feedback practices, perceived outsiders' creative inputs
12 to have more value, and rarely took idea- or task-based feedback personally. These
13 individuals perceived knowledge as distributed and thus tended to expect challenging
14 feedback, even from those who were less familiar with their ideas. Alternatively,
15 individuals with specialized or limited creative work experience tended to perceive
16 outsiders as challenging their creative authority or domain expertise and thus their self-
17 concepts.

18
19 Interview data from two successful founders at similar stages of their careers yet
20 with different levels of creative work experience illustrate this contrast. While the first
21 had launched and run two different prior businesses in different industries and was
22 currently launching his third in yet another industry, the second was launching a new
23 business in the same industry in which he had spent his career. When I asked them to
24 reflect on the critical feedback they had received regarding their ideas, the first replied:

25 So, I view myself as a boundary spanner, because I have such eclectic experience
26 in both medical devices as well entertainment...One thing I've had to learn over
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3 the course of my career working in very different spaces is that critical feedback
4 of my ideas is valuable, regardless of the source. Different perspectives help me
5 see things I couldn't have possibly seen on my own. I mean even in cases when
6 the quality of the feedback is sub-par, I still can usually find something useful.
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12 (F28)

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14 In contrast, the second responded:

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16 I think there's reason to be wary and skeptical of critical feedback, particularly
17 during the early stages, when I think most ideas end up dying... The guys in here
18 giving feedback are generalists. I've been working in this field for 20-odd years,
19 so it's really no surprise if they're not tracking with my ideas. (F42)
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26 The breadth of entrepreneurs' prior creative work experience not only conditioned
27 the psychological ownership reappraisal process, but also affected the relationship
28 between idea and identity work. As with increases in collective sensemaking, more
29 extensive and diverse prior experience equipped entrepreneurs with a clearer
30 understanding of the scientific and visionary founder roles, thereby facilitating identity
31 work. Such clarity thus compressed the number of instances of feedback and idea work
32 necessary to trigger subsequent identity work. For instance, the first founder quoted
33 above described how his substantial experience gave him greater knowledge of the
34 founder role: "This is just something you pick up along the way through a lot of trial and
35 error... the knowledge of what it takes to be a successful founder" (F28).
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49 **The Effects of Identity Work Practices on Optimal Distinctiveness**

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51 As illustrated, entrepreneurs used identity work practices to reconcile their self-
52 concepts with the founder roles they were exposed to as they moved through the creative
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3 revision process. Entrepreneurs who engaged in transcending increased their
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5 identification with the visionary founder role; those who engaged in professionalizing
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7 increased their identification with the scientific founder role; and those who engaged in
8
9 decoupling dis-identified from any socially-prescribed founder roles. As illustrated by the
10
11 quotes in prior sections, each of these practices provided the entrepreneurs with a sense
12
13 of clarity regarding the overlap between their self-concepts and their work. Importantly,
14
15 however, the different frameworks they used to reposition their self-concepts affected
16
17 their ability to achieve a sense of optimal distinctiveness as members of the local
18
19 entrepreneurial community. Optimal distinctiveness is achieved when the psychological
20
21 needs for assimilation and differentiation are balanced through group affiliation (Brewer,
22
23 1991).⁵ Such an outcome is of critical importance to entrepreneurship and the creative
24
25 revision process, as imbalance can affect material outcomes related to an idea (e.g.,
26
27 funding) and the entrepreneur (e.g., exit from a particular feedback/resourcing
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29 community, exit from a venture). In this section, I illustrate the relationship between each
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31 of the three identity work practices and their effects on the ability to achieve optimal
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33 distinctiveness within a local entrepreneurial community.
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40 *Effects of transcending on optimal distinctiveness.* Since transcending involves
41
42 increased identification with the visionary founder role, entrepreneurs who adopted this
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44 approach signaled that their ideas were unique and should not be subject to the same
45
46 scrutiny. In other words, they viewed themselves as different from the other founders,
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48 and increasingly, as outsiders to the local entrepreneurial community. As such, they
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54 ⁵ Although it is possible for individuals to achieve optimal distinctiveness by way of multiple group
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56 memberships (i.e., assimilating into one; differentiating from another), evidence suggests that balancing
57
58 assimilation and differentiation *within* groups increases group identification (Brewer, 1991).
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3 began to frame additional exposure to identity-sharpening feedback as affirming their
4
5 distinctiveness, thus “fueling the fire” to succeed. One entrepreneur explained:

6
7 It’s fueling my fire. I want it to succeed that much more just so I can say “I told
8
9 you it’d work.” And that’s really honestly how I operate. So, all these advisors
10
11 should be telling me “it’s a horrible idea, I’ll never do it,” and then, you know, I’ll
12
13 whip it out in 6 months. Might speed up the process for me. (F31)
14
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16
17 This type of perceived differentiation emboldened entrepreneurs’ commitment to their
18
19 projects, yet led them to begin distancing themselves from feedback providers, who they
20
21 perceived as misinformed or misunderstanding. For instance, a number of these
22
23 entrepreneurs stopped going to social events attended by their peers and feedback
24
25 providers. Whether self-induced or community-induced, such isolation became
26
27 deleterious to the entrepreneurs’ ability to attract resources. Without feedback, it was also
28
29 difficult for the entrepreneurs to obtain clarity on how to proceed. One entrepreneur from
30
31 the sciences expressed this during his exit interview with me:
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35 I’ve never really seen the point of trying to get feedback from people that don’t or
36
37 can’t or won’t understand what you’re trying to do. But, yeah, it’s difficult going
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39 at this alone without input—I get that. I’ve been thinking about applying to some
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41 educational programs that might get me into circles of other like-minded
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43 scientists, and then maybe I’d have some skills that I could bring back to this idea
44
45 one day. (F25)
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49 These quotes illustrate how transcending enhanced entrepreneurs’ sense of
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51 differentiation, yet impeded their assimilation, leading them to seek membership in other
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53 expert communities that might provide a stronger fit.
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3 *Effects of professionalizing on optimal distinctiveness.* Since professionalizing
4 involves increased identification with the community-prescribed scientific founder role,
5 the approach prioritizes assimilation over differentiation with respect to the
6 entrepreneurial community. For instance, halfway through his residency in one of the
7 incubators, one entrepreneur explained:
8
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10 I honestly can't imagine a better environment for learning the science behind
11 entrepreneurship. I've learned so much from [the individuals in charge] and from
12 all of the other teams. There's a real sense of camaraderie. I mean, I know at the
13 end of the day we're sort of competing for investment, but it's like any sport,
14 where you're cheering for your own team to win, but you also just want the sport
15 to thrive. And y'know, like, in some ways I'm just excited about becoming a
16 better overall competitor. (F4)
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30 This quote illustrates how professionalizing led founders to frame entrepreneurship as a
31 game, where winning and losing was less about realizing the potential of a creative idea
32 and more about garnering investment, landing the first customer, or becoming a better
33 professional/entrepreneur in general.
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40 While this practice offered the entrepreneurs a means of strengthening their
41 affiliations with the local entrepreneurial community, it diminished the strength of their
42 sense of distinctiveness. As such, the practice rendered the entrepreneurs more
43 susceptible to new entrepreneurial or career opportunities that might better affirm their
44 unique creativity. For instance, during an exit interview, one entrepreneur who had
45 engaged in professionalizing admitted:
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53 As a matter of fact, I've gone into this whole business venture with the intention
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3 of writing a check myself to this business and I'm not ready to do that yet. And I
4
5 wanted to get to that point. And quite frankly I don't know that I could ask
6
7 anybody to write a check, until I'm ready to do it myself...Honestly, I feel like I
8
9 need to find an idea that more closely aligns with the things I care about. (F7)

10
11
12 As this quote illustrates, entrepreneurs who engaged in professionalizing were susceptible
13
14 to new opportunities and ideas that were better aligned with their unique interests.

15
16 *Effects of decoupling on optimal distinctiveness.* Although decoupling involves
17
18 dis-identification with the different founder roles, the entrepreneurs who adopted this
19
20 approach still perceived a strong degree of assimilation. They embraced professional
21
22 obligations associated with commercialization (e.g., "to wear the [scientific] founder hat"
23
24 or "play the part") when it was deemed useful for stewarding an idea's success. For
25
26 instance, during an exit interview, an entrepreneur reflected on her next steps:
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31 Look, there's a part of me that realizes that this pitching and fundraising process
32
33 is totally a game, for sure. But it's an important game for me to play at times in
34
35 order to get the right types of access and support that I need to make this a reality.
36
37 So, for me, I'm completely happy to engage and play the part for as long as I
38
39 think it will enhance the credibility of what we're doing. (F26)

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42 Simultaneously, decoupling affirmed their perceived differentiation, as their self-
43
44 concepts remained anchored to their psychological ownership of a particular creative
45
46 vision for change, albeit a much broader and more abstract vision than originally
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48 articulated. In this way, psychological ownership of a creative idea affirmed their sense
49
50 of uniqueness. One entrepreneur explained this during his final interview with me:
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54 There's a problem staring me in the face every morning when I wake up, and
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3 there's a belief that something like what we're doing needs to happen and is going
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5 to happen...My idea from the start was to do something fundamentally different
6
7 with [this business], so I'm super proud that we've been able to hang onto this
8
9 vision. (F9)
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12 Thus, decoupling provided entrepreneurs with a sense of optimal distinctiveness—the
13
14 ability to both fit in with and stand out from the local startup community.
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17 **DISCUSSION**

18 **Toward an Identity-based Theory of Creative Revision**

19
20 My review of the existing literature suggests that the feedback process shapes
21
22 prototype development by directing creative workers' attention and influencing their
23
24 intentions. The findings from this study contribute to and extend this understanding of the
25
26 feedback process by highlighting how such attention and intentions are further shaped by
27
28 creative workers' self-concepts. The identity-based model of creative revision surfaced in
29
30 this study (see Figure 2) specifically emphasizes entrepreneurs' psychological ownership
31
32 as a linchpin in this process. Individuals' psychological ownership of their ideas
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34 corresponded with their initial identification as inventors more broadly, compelling
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36 efforts to pursue those ideas despite associated challenges. Conversely, to the extent that
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38 it was maintained, such psychological ownership restricted the revision of ideas,
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40 particularly after the receipt of identity-sharpening feedback.
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47 Despite this restriction, the findings illustrate that many of the ideas did change,
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49 and some quite drastically. Individuals who engaged in collective sensemaking found
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51 merit in relinquishing at least some of the psychological ownership of ideas, and this
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53 effect was accentuated for those with more eclectic prior creative work experience. The
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3 entrepreneurs who reaffirmed their psychological ownership thus were more highly
4 restricted in their idea and identity work than those who abstracted or relinquished such
5 ownership. These relationships operated through the mechanism of entrepreneurs'
6 constrained attention and intentions, which led entrepreneurs to overlook or dismiss much
7 of the advice and criticism they received.
8
9

10 Divergence between the proposed and actual idea-based revisions introduced
11 varying levels of misalignment between individuals' self-concepts and the scientific
12 founder role prescribed by the local entrepreneurial community. In response,
13 entrepreneurs engaged in identity work, considering the alternative visionary founder role
14 to reconcile their self-concepts with an identity reference point better aligned with their
15 ongoing idea work practices. Although identity work practices resolved ambiguity in
16 entrepreneurs' self-concepts, they differed in their effects on the entrepreneurs' abilities
17 to achieve a sense of optimal distinctiveness within the local entrepreneurial community.
18
19 Entrepreneurs who identified with the visionary founder role prioritized differentiation
20 over assimilation, which led them to search for other communities which might support
21 their ideas. Conversely, entrepreneurs who identified most closely with the scientific
22 founder role prioritized assimilation over differentiation, rendering them susceptible to
23 other ideas and opportunities that might better align with their unique interests. Only
24 entrepreneurs who separated their self-concepts from the diverging cultural conceptions
25 of the founder role were able to balance commitments to both their creative projects and
26 the professional community.
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50 Taken together, this emergent model and theory offer several counter-intuitive
51 implications that challenge and extend existing scholarship. I elaborate on each of these
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3 contributions below.
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5 **Expanding Our Understanding of the Creative Revision Process**

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8 The existing literature on creative work both inside and outside the context of
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10 entrepreneurship is concerned with the implications of feedback as multiple parties
11
12 critique and develop new creative products (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Hargadon &
13
14 Sutton, 1997; Shah & Tripsas, 2007; Sonenshein, 2013; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). This
15
16 research is focused on outlining the practices and social networks that underpin collective
17
18 acts of creativity (Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2015), attending
19
20 less to the identity-based dynamics that might affect creative revision. The process model
21
22 surfaced in this paper highlights that although the revision of ideas in response to external
23
24 feedback is a critical step in the creative process, such work is constrained by creative
25
26 workers' psychological ownership of their ideas, often requiring subsequent efforts to
27
28 reposition their self-concepts. This insight offers important implications for research.
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33 The notion that creative workers' psychological ownership of their ideas
34
35 conditions their subsequent idea and identity work increases our understanding of the
36
37 challenges associated with the creative revision process. A review of the literature reveals
38
39 that thus far, scholars typically have examined these topics independently, assuming that
40
41 idea work is focused on overcoming informational constraints (Harrison & Rouse, 2015)
42
43 while identity work involves forming or reforming one's self-concept within the context
44
45 of demanding or changing roles (Kreiner et al., 2006). My findings reveal that identity-
46
47 sharpening feedback practices not only highlight deficiencies in the proposed ideas, but
48
49 also challenge individuals' self-concepts. As individuals respond to such feedback, they
50
51 must consider adjusting not only their ideas, but also the extent to which their self-
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3 concepts are rooted in those ideas.
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5 My findings also provide insight into the tension posed by the first epigraph of this
6 paper, whereby entrepreneurs are expected to be determined and stubborn, yet flexible
7 and adaptive. The findings suggest that these ostensibly competing demands correspond
8 with a higher order demand—the need to achieve or regain a sense of optimal
9 distinctiveness within the entrepreneurial community (Brewer, 1991). Entrepreneurs who
10 refuse to accommodate external demands retain their distinctiveness, but run the risk of
11 being viewed as stubborn, whereas those who accommodate all demands assimilate well,
12 but run the risk of “holding nothing sacred.” Surprisingly, among the three identity work
13 practices employed by entrepreneurs during the creative revision process, only one of
14 these practices—decoupling—enables entrepreneurs to achieve a sense of optimal
15 distinctiveness. Entrepreneurs who engage in decoupling dis-identify with the socially-
16 prescribed founder role altogether, such that their self-concepts remain anchored to the
17 broad creative problems they seek to address, while also allowing the underpinning
18 assumptions to change shape in accordance with external feedback.
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37 While my findings largely focus on the importance of optimal distinctiveness
38 within the context of two particular startup incubators, the importance of this outcome
39 should not be viewed as artefactual or idiosyncratic to this setting. Since many
40 entrepreneurs and creative workers encounter liabilities of newness as they seek to
41 introduce novel and useful solutions to the world, they are exceptionally dependent on
42 group memberships that might alleviate those liabilities (Amezcuca, Grimes, Bradley, &
43 Wiklund, 2013). At the same time, because those entrepreneurs and creative workers
44 often have a disproportionate desire for autonomy, such group memberships remain
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3 precarious unless those individuals can achieve a sense of optimal distinctiveness
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5 (Elsbach & Flynn, 2013). Consequently, perceiving limited opportunities for such
6
7 optimal distinction within those critical groups can threaten creative workers'
8
9 identification with such groups and result in important, material implications for
10
11 entrepreneurs and their ideas. While my findings are suggestive in highlighting potential
12
13 material consequences (e.g., departing the incubator, joining a new startup) for both the
14
15 idea and the entrepreneur when optimal distinctiveness is lacking, it is less clear how the
16
17 presence of optimal distinctiveness within these feedback communities might
18
19 alternatively affect long-term success. Future research on creativity, innovation and
20
21 entrepreneurship should explore how optimal distinctiveness within groups and across
22
23 groups contributes to important long-term outcomes such as persistence and audience
24
25 evaluations over time.
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30 **Bridging Research on Psychological Ownership and Founder Identities**

31
32
33 More specific to existing research on entrepreneurship, the findings from this
34
35 study, which clarify that entrepreneurs' psychological ownership of ideas serves as an
36
37 initial identity anchor within the commercialization process, contribute to and extend
38
39 recent studies of founder identities (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011;
40
41 Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). This growing body of work has revealed that entrepreneurs
42
43 derive their self-concepts from broad social groups or categories (e.g., environmentalists)
44
45 as well as from the specific roles that characterize the commercialization process (e.g.,
46
47 inventor, founder). My research suggests, however, that although these prior studies
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49 provide a basis for understanding commitments to a set of behaviors more generally (e.g.,
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51 becoming an activist, launching or joining a startup), they cannot explain entrepreneurs'
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3 commitments to transforming ideas into reality. The findings from this study address this
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5 gap, highlighting specifically how psychological ownership of particular creative ideas
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7 informs decisions to pursue and persist with particular entrepreneurial projects.
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10 By bridging the literatures on psychological ownership and founder identities, this
11
12 study also provides insight into how and why those identities shift over time. While prior
13
14 research has suggested that entrepreneurs tend to consistently identify with particular
15
16 roles (i.e., inventor, founder, developer), thereby affecting their passion for specific
17
18 activities over time (Cardon et al., 2009), my findings alternatively suggest that the
19
20 salience of a particular role likely evolves over time by way of identity work. For
21
22 instance, entrepreneurs in this study with strong psychological ownership of their ideas
23
24 initially embraced the inventor role; however, as they received feedback on their ideas,
25
26 the role expectations associated with commercializing and exploiting opportunities (i.e.,
27
28 founder role) became more salient.
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33 Third, in bridging these two literatures, this study deepens scholarly
34
35 understandings of psychological ownership. In prior research, scholars have focused
36
37 largely on how psychological ownership emerges because it increases self-efficacy,
38
39 affirms one's identity and serves as a target of personal investment (Pierce et al., 2003).
40
41 Although scholars have shown that feedback can trigger a sense of loss amongst
42
43 individuals who maintain psychological ownership over their ideas (Baer & Brown,
44
45 2012), it has been assumed that those individuals retain their high levels of psychological
46
47 ownership after receiving such feedback, causing them to resist suggestions for change.
48
49 By taking a process perspective and examining feedback and psychological ownership
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51 over time, I have challenged and extended this literature. Specifically, by introducing the
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3 concept of psychological ownership reappraisal, the findings specify several different
4 ways in which psychological ownership evolves, while exposing the conditions under
5 which such evolution occurs. Thus, this study offers insight into the importance of
6 reappraisal in constraining and enabling the creative revision process as well as the
7 embracement of particular creative roles.
8
9

14 **Founder Roles as Dynamic and Equivocal**

16
17 Although studies of identity work make it clear that identities may change over
18 time, scholars typically have assumed that the social roles and social categories from
19 which entrepreneurs derive those identities are likely to remain stable. Hence, in several
20 early studies, researchers focused on surfacing typologies that define and illustrate the
21 range of possible identities for entrepreneurs to adopt (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart &
22 Gruber, 2011). Specifically, research stemming from social identity theory denoted
23 several founder identities such as “darwinian,” “missionary” and “communitarian,”
24 which helped delineate the types of organizations a particular entrepreneur might choose
25 to form (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). Alternatively, research stemming from identity
26 theory surfaced a set of roles such as “founder,” “inventor” and “developer” which have
27 been used to empirically examine entrepreneurs’ passion at various stages of
28 organizational formation (Cardon, Gregoire, Stevens, & Patel, 2013; Cardon & Kirk,
29 2015; Cardon et al., 2009). While these typologies are useful for explaining variance in
30 the entrepreneurial process, my findings suggest that the categories and roles from which
31 entrepreneurs construct their identities are subject to various cultural reference points in
32 practice. As such, because the founder role is culturally situated, it may be ascribed
33 different attributes at different points in time by different social communities. In my
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3 setting, this resulted in two alternative cultural conceptions of the founder role that vied
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5 for the entrepreneurs' allegiance (i.e., visionary and scientific).
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8 In the future, researchers should thus move beyond creating typologies that define
9
10 the range and parameters of possible roles and social categories from which entrepreneurs
11
12 can derive their identities. Examining how these roles and categories are in flux would
13
14 further enhance our understanding of the complex and lived reality of entrepreneurs as
15
16 they move through the challenging process of commercializing their ideas. Moreover, my
17
18 findings highlight that in the midst of such role equivocality, entrepreneurs struggle to
19
20 achieve optimal distinctiveness. Thus, another key and important theoretical implication
21
22 for identity scholarship is that changing and equivocal role identities may produce
23
24 paradoxical prescriptions (e.g., be stubborn, yet flexible) which can create confusion (if
25
26 not crisis) as entrepreneurs navigate social demands.
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30 31 **Feedback on Feedback: The Importance of Collective Sensemaking**

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33 In prior studies on social identity, researchers have asserted that members of peer
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35 groups often exhibit high solidarity; occasionally, in-group solidarity leads to bias that
36
37 can challenge interactions with outsiders (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Tajfel,
38
39 Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979). Given these arguments, I was surprised to find that
40
41 the founders in my study who were most likely to incorporate extensive and dramatic
42
43 change in response to external feedback were those who were also most extensively
44
45 embedded within peer groups and conversant with their peers. For instance, among the 26
46
47 incubator residents in my sample, 17 had co-founders. In all 17 cases, the entrepreneurs
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49 engaged in more extensive forms of idea and identity work, suggesting a striking
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51 reinforcing effect between incubator peers and co-founders in encouraging entrepreneurs
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3 to relinquish at least some psychological ownership of their ideas. In other words,
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5 collective sensemaking efforts with those in similar social positions enhanced rather than
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7 detracted from a willingness to accommodate external demands.
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10 The findings suggest that these peer group conversations created a context in
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12 which entrepreneurs could “depersonalize” external feedback, and thereby more seriously
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14 consider the assumptions and evidence offered therein. Through collective sensemaking,
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16 entrepreneurs were able to view idea-based feedback as a standard part of the creative
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18 revision process rather than as personal criticism. This finding introduces an opportunity
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20 for researchers to more systematically examine the conditions that might affect this
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22 relationship between collective sensemaking and effective creative revision. For instance,
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24 the characteristics of the peer group (e.g., size, diversity, team identity) or specific peer
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26 group members (e.g., social identities, psychological ownership) might further affect or
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28 condition this relationship. Less diversity, for example, may lead to a pronounced “echo
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30 chamber effect” in which initial attention and intentions are reinforced rather than
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32 broadened. In the future, researchers also might consider collective identities within
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34 particular teams and groups, how those collective identities are negotiated during creative
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36 revision, and how they affect individuals’ identities.
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42 **Limitations and Additional Opportunities for Future Research**

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44 The insights generated by this study for understanding the creative revision
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46 process are grounded in my choice to focus on the idea stage of entrepreneurship (i.e., the
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48 pre-revenue, pre-customer, pre-funding stage). This choice enabled me to isolate identity
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50 and idea work prior to the introduction of additional accountabilities and dependencies
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52 (e.g., employees, investors) that are likely to complicate the theoretical model, yet are
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3 important components of the entrepreneurial process and entrepreneurial action. In the
4
5 future, scholars might look for opportunities to build on the identity-based model of
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7 creative revision surfaced in this study by examining how increased accountability and
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9 resource dependencies in later stages of the entrepreneurial process condition the identity
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11 and idea work that ensues. Similarly, researchers might seek to understand the long-term
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13 effects of such identity and idea work during the idea stage. How, for instance, might
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15 particular idea and identity work practices imprint onto the organizational culture of
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17 consequent organizations (Baron, Hannan, & Burton, 1999) or contribute to the resilience
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19 and success of the founders (Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Rouse, 2016)?
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24 Insights from this study also are grounded in the particular founders I chose to
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26 study, who operated in different contexts: some resided within incubators, others
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28 occasionally visited these incubators, and others maintained no relationship with the
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30 incubators. I believe that these contextual differences improve the study in that they help
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32 substantiate the generalizability of the findings to some extent. That said, all of the
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34 founders in this study were highly involved in generating their ideas, and thus were prone
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36 to perceive those ideas as both highly novel and highly personal. Also, all were involved
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38 in attempts to raise capital, which meant they were exposed to potential status, power and
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40 goal differences that exacerbated the perceived need to change. As such, these individuals
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42 were embedded within “multiplex” role relationships, a factor that might accentuate the
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44 identity implications for feedback. These individuals were particularly appropriate for
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46 observing entrepreneurs’ identity-based relationships with their ideas and their responses
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48 to challenging feedback; yet, it is important to note the opportunity for future research
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50 that would involve expanding the sample. While most entrepreneurs pursue financing,
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3 only a relative minority are involved in the type of equity-based financing efforts pursued
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5 by those in my sample. In the future, researchers could attempt to test the practices,
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7 conditions, and theoretical relationships surfaced in this study with different types of
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9 founders (e.g., “necessity” entrepreneurs, franchise operators, founders recruited later in
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11 the process for their expertise who have little idea-based involvement) and different types
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13 of creative workers (e.g., artists, designers, scholars). If, however, creative workers in a
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15 variety of different contexts are frequently exposed to challenging feedback in their
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17 efforts to turn their ideas into reality—which seems to be the case—then this study has
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19 surfaced an important theoretical gap and the foundations of an identity-based theory of
20
21 creative revision to help address it.
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Table 1: Data Inventory

Data type	Quantity	Original data source	Original (intended) data audience
Entrepreneur interviews	<i>Primary sample:</i> 30+ hours of recorded and transcribed audio from 69 interviews (captured 93 separate instances of feedback responses) <i>Secondary sample:</i> 20+ hours of recorded and transcribed audio from 34 interviews (captured 50 separate instances of feedback responses)	<i>Primary sample:</i> 26 incubator residents (19 of which had co-founders) <i>Secondary sample:</i> 33 incubator affiliates/incubator non-affiliates (10 of which had co-founders)	Researcher
Stakeholder interviews	7+ hours of recorded and transcribed audio from 12 interviews	2 incubator directors, 10 business mentors	Researcher
Observational data	<i>Primary sample:</i> 36+ hours of recorded and transcribed audio; 14 weeks of non-recorded on-site observation of feedback exchanges and creative revision in an incubator	Audio and researcher’s notes from 17 “pitch events,” 10 private mentoring sessions, and 5 semi-private mentoring sessions	Researcher
Mentor notes	<i>Primary sample:</i> 16 files (33 pages) of mentor evaluations and feedback given to incubator residents <i>Secondary sample:</i> 28 files (71 pages) of mentor evaluations and feedback given to incubator affiliates	Incubator mentors	Incubator staff and mentors
Other documentation	<i>Primary sample:</i> 70 business model canvases; 20 pages of quantitative peer evaluations; 6 business plans; 3 investor “one-sheets”/executive summaries; 8 “pitch decks”; 1 “customer letter of intent”	<i>Primary sample:</i> 26 incubator residents	Business stakeholders (i.e., investors, customers, employees, mentors, and partners)

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Table 2: Patterns of Creative Revision*

Founder	Initial psych. ownership of the idea	Co-founder	Incubator resident	Incubator affiliate	Prior experience	Psychological ownership	Idea work practice	Identity work practice
1	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
2	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
3	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
4	Y	Y	Y+	N	G	Rl	Rn	P
5	Y	Y	Y+	N	G	Rl	Rn	P
6	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Rl	Rn	P
7	Y	Y	Y+	N	G	Rl	Rn	P
8	Y	N	Y+	N	S	Rf	Df	T
9	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
10	Y	Y	Y+	N	G	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
11	Y	Y	Y+	N	G	Rl	Rn	P
12	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Rl	Rn	P
13	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp	Dec
14	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp	Dec
15	Y	Y	Y+	N	S	Ab	Rp	Dec
16	Y	N	Y	N	S	Rf	Df	T
17	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
18	Y	N	Y	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
19	Y	Y	Y	N	S	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
20	Y	Y	Y	N	S	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
21	?	N	N	Y	G	Ab	Rp	P
22	Y	N	Y	N	S	Rf	Df	T
23	?	N	N	Y	G	Rl	Rn, Rp	P
24	Y	N	Y	N	G	Ab	Rp	Dec
25	Y	N	Y	N	S	Rf	Df	T
26	Y	Y	Y	N	S	Ab	Rp, Df	Dec
27	Y	N	Y	N	G	Ab	Rp	Dec
28	Y	N	Y	N	G	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
29	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Ab	Rp	Dec
30	Y	Y	N	N	S	Rf	Df	T
31	Y	N	Y	N	S	Rf	Df	T
32	Y	N	N	Y	G	Rl	Rn	P
33	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
34	Y	Y	N	N	S	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
35	Y	Y	N	N	S	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
36	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn	P
37	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn	P
38	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
39	Y	N	N	Y	G	Ab	Rp	Dec
40	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
41	Y	N	N	Y	G	Ab	Rp	Dec
42	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
43	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
44	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
45	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Ab	Rp	Dec
46	?	N	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn, Rp	P
47	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
48	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
49	Y	N	N	N	S	Rf	Df	T
50	Y	Y	N	Y	G	Rl	Rn	P
51	?	N	N	Y	G	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
52	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
53	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
54	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn	P
55	Y	Y	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn	P
56	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rf	Df	T
57	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn, Rp, Df	P
58	Y	N	N	Y	S	Rl	Rn	P
59	Y	N	N	N	S	Rf	Df	T

* Y = yes; N = no; Y+ = residency via accelerator program; G = Generalized; S = Specialized; Rf = Reaffirming; Ab = Abstracting; Rl = Relinquishing; T = Transcending; Dec = Decoupling; P = Professionalizing; Df = Defending; Rp = Repairing; Rn = Re-engineering.

Table 3: Examples of Theoretical Dimensions and Second-Order Themes

Aggregate dimension	Second-order theme	Exemplary quotes
Feedback context	Identity-sharpening feedback	“You’re missing a lot of very fundamental aspects that would make this business investable.”
		“Why is this new? There’s at least a half-dozen other companies doing this right now.”
		“There are so many disjointed ideas floating around here, that it’s difficult to know where to start. Is this an art project or is this a business? Because if it’s an art project, then I guess this works. But if you’re trying to build a business, then you really need to get clear on some fundamental things like who your customer segment is and what their problem is and will they pay you to solve it.”
Psychological ownership	Initial	(F33) “For me personally, the experience that I had was so moving and so life-changing and so transformational that I said, ‘I have to do this for a living, and I have to share with other people what I went through, and I need to help other people the way I was helped.’ It’s sort of like I’m going to do this at all costs, and I believe in my idea so passionately that I’m going to take 20 years of success and experience that I have in one industry and set it aside.”
	Reaffirming	(F47) “Clearly there are some problems that we’ve got to work out, but I’m not willing to concede to a lot of these guys. I’ve been thinking about my idea for several years now, so it’s not like I’m new to the game. I get that some of their suggestions might be useful from a purely business perspective, but it would fundamentally change the essence of this business. Again, I’m not willing to go down without a fight.”
	Abstracting	(F30) “I gotta speak from the seat of my passion, whatever that is, and it’s probably written in my story and my story is powerful and it’s rooted in the pain that I felt when I first started thinking about my idea.”
	Relinquishing	(F24) “Oftentimes, they get confused. I originally mistook the vision and the idea as kind of the same thing, but they’re not always. My vision is more of my ethical goal or something that I’m striving for, and the idea is usually the vehicle in trying to achieve that vision, and I think a lot of people get confused by that, and they hold onto their idea so strongly, and they think they’re holding onto their vision.”
Identity work	Transcending	(F34) “Yeah, it’s funny. I kind of wear these pivots as a badge of honor. Now I can go into investors and say, ‘Look, we’ve tried all of these different directions, and they didn’t work.’ Investors seem to really appreciate it when you’ve sacrificed your own ideas for the greater good—you know, the greater good of the company.”
		(F31) “You know that Apple commercial ‘Here’s to the crazy ones?’ Yeah, so it’s basically like most of the world is going to see you as crazy, but it takes a little bit of crazy to actually change things. I think that’s

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true; I definitely relate to that. [laughter]"

Decoupling

(F27) "There's this scientific model of how you do startups that's being taught, and I suppose that's fine. I don't have a problem with that in general. But I think it's been important for me to recognize that that's not why I'm here. I'm here, because this has been my vision for a really long time."

Professionalizing

(F36) "I used to think of myself as a salesman for this company and for the ideas in my head, but I think it's more appropriate to think of my role in this process as a scientist... I'm out there systematically testing various concepts in the market."

Idea work

Defending

[Clarifying any or all aspects of the business model] (F30) "We just need to clarify our story. For the next week, that's what we need to focus on—just nailing what our algorithm will do... [The angel investors] weren't tracking, so we have to pull that out for sure."

[Justifying any or all aspects of the business model] (F43) "Earlier this week I ran a survey with my primary customer segment and 100% of the respondents said that they would pay for [my product] when it's released."

[Broadening any or all aspects of the business model] (F44) "I think what we're starting with is fine, but users may need more features to justify paying money. I think we need to spend some time considering what additional features we can add to make this work... I also think we can probably expand our intended customer segment beyond just people in [this city]."

Repairing

[Questioning any or all aspects of the business model] (F9) "Okay, let's step back from this canvas for a minute and discuss the big picture. What is it that we want to achieve? I think this will help us figure out how much of this is wheat and how much of this is chaff."

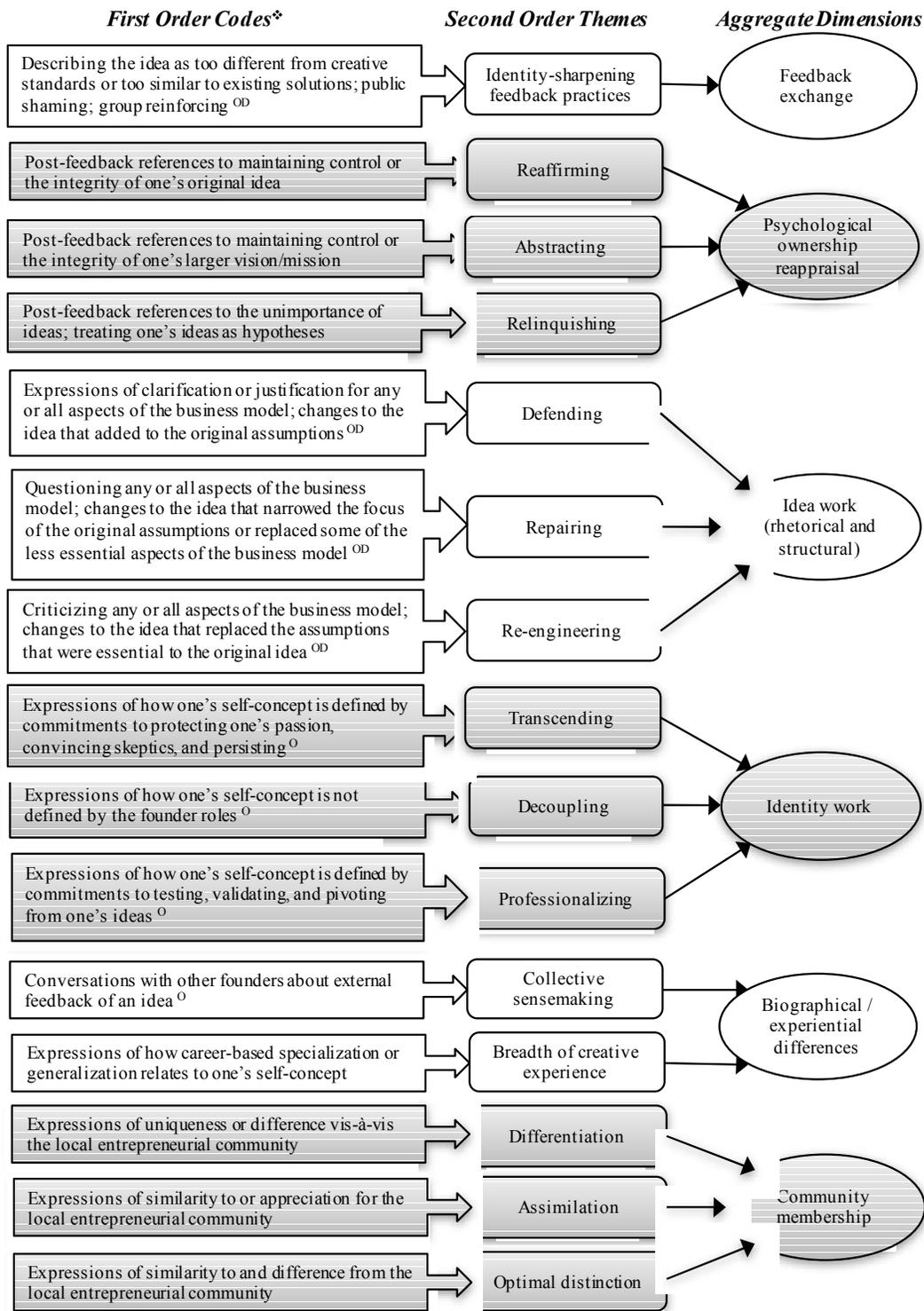
[Narrowing any or all aspects of the business model] (F26) "So at least for the time being we're going to focus on the core value proposition. There's lots of directions we could take this in the future and functionality that we've discussed adding, but I think it's important that we're able to prove that the foundation of this idea is solid."

[Replacing the key activities and peripheral mechanics] (F45) "I started out thinking that the best way to reach customers at this sort of scale was going to be the whole digital content marketing, but I actually think face-to-face is going to be critical in helping people understand the value proposition, so I'm revising the go-to-market strategy and budget now at least at first to create room for an active sales team."

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	Re-engineering	<p><i>[Criticizing any or all aspects of the business model]</i> (F4) “They’re right. There’s really no clear path to revenue right now, and angel money is no longer chasing after companies that can’t monetize their user base. We need a much more compelling value proposition that compels people to part with hard earned cash.”</p> <p><i>[Replacing any or all aspects of the business model]</i> (F58) “Yeah, wow, when we started I think we were focused on building a language tutoring app, which is hilarious to think. Now we’ve pivoted to the point, where we’re trying to build the next killer dating app.”</p>
Biographical and experiential differences	Collective sensemaking	<p>(F1) “What did you think about their point about this being more of a platform?”</p> <p>(F18) “Yeah, I don’t know. I like what you’re doing, but clearly there’s more money to be made if you go the platform route. It’s probably worth considering.”</p> <p>(F1) “Yeah, it just seems so, I don’t know, sterile. The story gets lost, but you’re right. It would probably be a lot easier to raise money if we just took the advice.”</p>
	Prior experience	<p><i>[Generalized]</i> (F46) “Yeah, I consider myself a serial entrepreneur, and the projects I tend to take on tend to be all over the place in terms of industry. The only real thing that they tend to have in common is that I think they’re tackling a big problem.”</p> <p><i>[Generalized]</i> (F57) “There are three different ideas I’m working on right now. This one I’m doing by myself, but yeah I’m working on two more that are really unrelated.”</p> <p><i>[Specialized]</i> (F38) “Prior to doing this I was a sound engineer for 20 years, so I guess you could say that I’ve been working toward this my whole career. Those experiences have definitely impacted me, and I think it’s why I felt compelled to start [this company]”</p>
Community membership	Differentiation	(F22) “Oh, I definitely don’t fit in there anymore. I can understand why some people embrace their methods, but I also think the constant deconstruction can lead to paralysis. I need to find people that can get behind my vision, not tear it down.”
	Assimilation	(F20) “There’s a really strong energy here that I feel a part of. I’m constantly impressed by the influx of new ideas and new opportunities, and that tends to rub off. If [our business] doesn’t take off, I now have several other ideas that I think I could get behind.”
	Optimal distinction	(F39) “Yeah, I feel like I’m part of the startup community here, but I also don’t know that I’ve drank the Kool-Aid if you know what I mean. It sort of feels like the right balance...Don’t get me wrong. Our business has benefitted tons from the exchange of ideas and the access that you get down at [the incubator], but there’s a point at which you can get sucked into making yourself look good at the next pitch day versus actually focusing on building something interesting and revolutionary.”

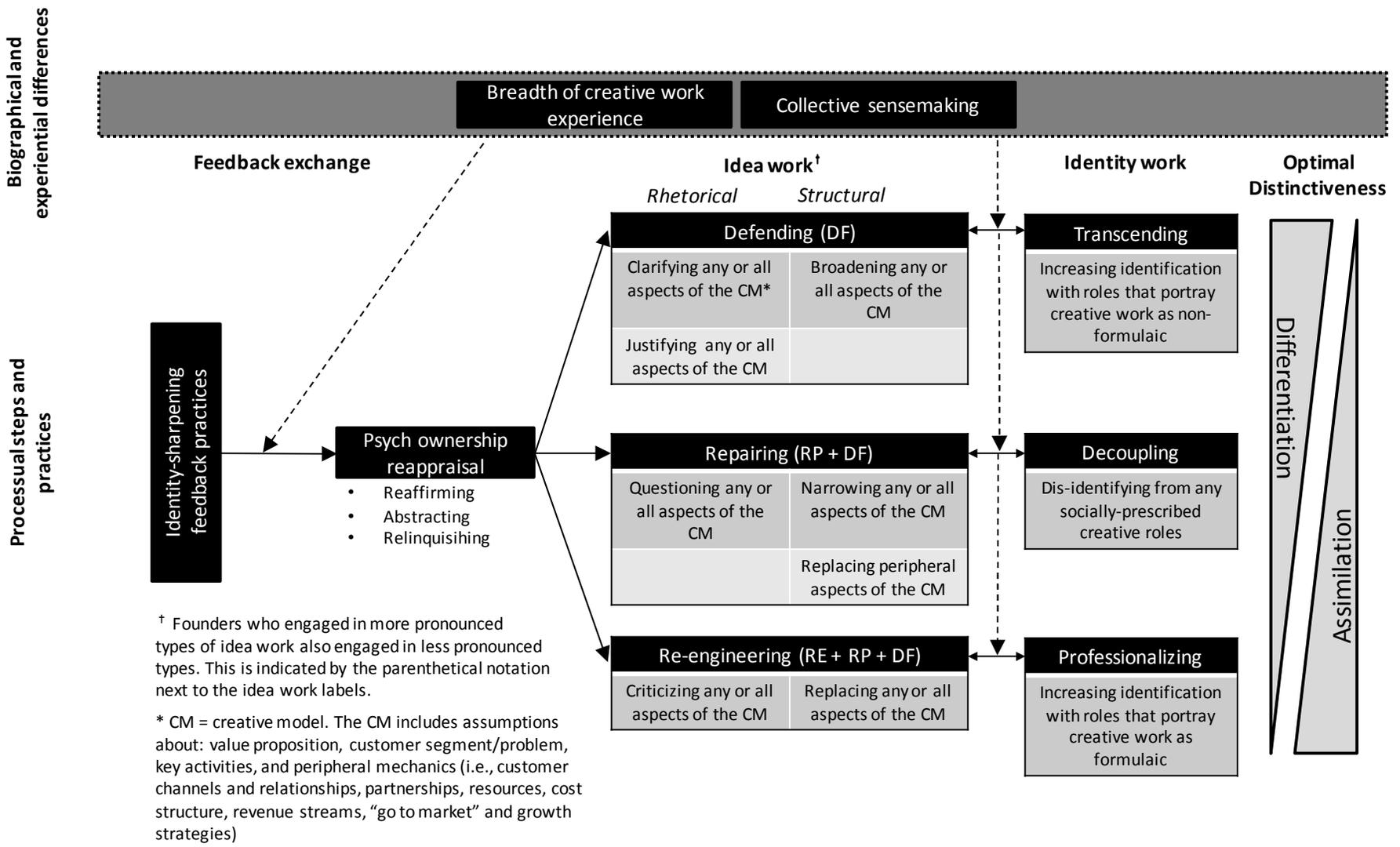
Figure 1: Data Structure



* All data were at least in part derived from semi-structured interviews; 'O' indicates supplemented with observations; 'D' indicates supplemented with documentation

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Figure 2: Identity-based Process Model of Creative Revision



About the Author

Matthew G. Grimes is an assistant professor in the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. He holds a Ph.D. degree in organization studies from Vanderbilt University. His current research focuses on linkages between entrepreneurship, identity, and categories.

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