

What happens to the parent–child bond when a graduate chooses entrepreneurship over a steady job?

A longitudinal Ethiopian study traces how founders move from parental tension to hard-won independence.

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The story most of us carry about entrepreneurial families is a hopeful one. A parent runs a shop, the child grows up underfoot, and the next generation slides into business almost by osmosis. This study turns that story over and looks at the underside. Its setting is Ethiopia, where a salaried job carries social prestige and starting a business is often read as reckless, even greedy. Against that backdrop, the authors followed 15 young graduate founders for two and a half years as they tried to build ventures their parents did not want them to build.

What emerges is not a tidy account of family support. It is a slow negotiation, phase by phase, in which founders manage who knows what, lean on the relatives who believe in them, and gradually pull away from those who do not. The researchers call this *individuation*: the step-by-step development of an independent entrepreneurial self, worked out through family relationships rather than apart from them.

For anyone who advises founders, mentors young people, or runs an incubator, the paper is a useful corrective. Family is rarely a simple tailwind. Sometimes it is the headwind a founder has to learn to fly into.

WHAT THE STUDY LOOKED AT

The research is a longitudinal, qualitative study set in Addis Ababa's incubator scene. The first author embedded himself in an agri-business incubator, rented a desk for two months, sat in on training, and attended pitch sessions, eventually identifying 15

graduate entrepreneurs to follow. Most held engineering degrees and had recently left university.

Across 2018 to 2020 the team ran 45 in-depth interviews in three rounds, each timed to the founders' progress: pre-startup, startup, and the up-and-running phase. They added unstructured observations and, where founders permitted, interviews with six parents. That permission was hard to get. Several founders would not let the researchers near their families; one admitted he had never told his parents he had started a company at all. The reluctance is itself a finding.

Analysis followed the Gioia method, building from first-order codes to aggregate themes and organising them along the three venture phases. The payoff is a process model rather than a snapshot, which is what lets the authors show the parent–founder relationship shifting over time.

One clarification on scope. This is a study of graduate entrepreneurs, not family firms in the usual sense — nothing is being handed down. What it shares with family-business research is the central claim that the family is woven into the entrepreneurial process, and on that point it speaks directly to anyone who thinks about families and enterprise.

WHAT THEY FOUND

The pre-startup phase: secrecy and quiet alliances

Before launching, founders met friction. In an authoritarian, communal household, choosing business over a secure post read as defiance, so founders managed information carefully. They

confided in the relatives they trusted, overwhelmingly mothers and the occasional uncle, and kept everyone else in the dark. One founder shared his plans only with his mother. Another deliberately talked to his father about anything except business. Parents, meanwhile, pressed the prestige of employment and warned that business was risky and slow to pay. The distance between what parents expected and what the graduate intended is what the authors call *career goal incompatibility*.

A detail worth sitting with: even parents who had run businesses discouraged their children. One founder's family had operated a milling plant and grain store for twenty years, yet kept the kids at arm's length from it and steered them towards education and government work.

The startup phase: scaffolding appears

Once ventures became visible – registered as legal entities, talked about at coffee ceremonies, picking up early wins – many parents softened. Fathers who controlled the family's resources began to pay attention. Support came as both feeling and finance: encouragement, seed money, covered living costs, even siblings abroad asked to contribute. The authors call this *parental scaffolding*. Founders worked the relationship from their side too, feeding parents good news, an award here, a signed contract there, to keep the goodwill alive. One founder told his mother the moment his team won a one-million-birr prize. She cried.

The up-and-running phase: ambivalence, then distance

This is the most revealing turn, and the one I would flag for anyone working with early-stage founders. Just as ventures got serious, parental support wobbled. Businesses were not generating cash quickly enough, and aging parents who had hoped to lean on their children's income grew uneasy. Some went back to pushing for a salaried job; a few even lined up employers. Meanwhile the founders were building their own networks of investors, partners and customers, and no longer needed their parents in the old way. They wanted to be treated as entrepreneurs, not as someone's son or daughter. The relational centre of gravity moved outside the family.

That movement is the individuation the title points to. Independence was not handed over. It was negotiated, slowly, against a steady undertow of attachment.

The most underappreciated point in the paper, to my reading, is that parental support and resistance are not two ends of a fixed dial. The same parent can scaffold a venture one year and quietly undermine it the next, depending on whether the business is meeting the family's own needs. Advisors who treat family backing

as settled at the moment of founding are reading a moving target as if it were fixed.

Mothers and fathers were not interchangeable

One pattern held throughout. Mothers tended to be the early confidants and emotional anchors. Fathers showed more resistance at first, then often turned into instrumental backers during startup, holding the purse strings and the useful contacts. Gender shaped who the founder turned to, and when.

WHY IT MATTERS

The headline contribution is conceptual. The authors take individuation theory, usually a developmental-psychology idea about adolescents separating from their parents, and carry it into entrepreneurship, showing it holds across the phases of venture creation. They also lean against a comfortable assumption in family-embeddedness research, that families broadly back entrepreneurial careers. In a communal, business-skeptical setting that assumption falls apart. Families are heterogeneous, and their support rises and falls with their own interests.

There is a policy reading as well. Incubators and entrepreneurship programmes in developing economies tend to train the individual founder. This study suggests they are working with half the picture. If the family is part of the venture's environment, and sometimes its largest obstacle, then programmes that engage families directly and build local legitimacy for entrepreneurship may achieve more than another session on pitching.

For business families, the mechanics will feel familiar to anyone who has watched a next-generation member try to start something the elders never sanctioned. Secrecy, selective disclosure, the slow earning of trust: these travel well beyond Ethiopia.

The authors are honest about the limits. They examined the family rather than the incubator or university as the founder's context, and they set aside questions of gender identity and how individuation interacts with the formation of an entrepreneurial identity. Those are the threads worth pulling next.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Treat the founder's family as part of the venture's operating environment, not background noise. Ask early who knows about the business, who supports it, and who does not.
2. Expect support to change. Map the family relationship at founding and revisit it as the venture matures, because backing can erode just as capital needs climb.

3. For incubators and policymakers in emerging economies, design interventions that reach families, not only founders. Building community legitimacy for entrepreneurship may matter more than another founder workshop.
4. Watch the gendered pattern. Mothers may be the early confidants while fathers hold the resources;

knowing who plays which role helps a founder line up the right support at the right moment.

5. Help founders name what they are doing. Framing the pull toward independence as a normal developmental process, rather than a betrayal of family, eases the guilt that often comes with it.

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