

Childhood trauma could hurt girls' goals of entrepreneurship

August 5 2010



(PhysOrg.com) -- Family violence, physical abuse or parents divorcing can play a role in keeping a girl from becoming an entrepreneur later in life. That's according to new research led by Zhen Zhang, assistant professor in the W. P. Carey School of Business at ASU. The research shows that without positive intervention negative experiences in adolescence might help discourage a girl from owning a business as an adult.

“Childhood trauma might impede girls’ natural genetic inclination to become entrepreneurs,” Zhang said. “But environmental factors such as peer support, mentor programs, positive internships, and other activities where kids learn about financial independence and being a business

owner can help mediate that. In the end, if girls get enough social and environmental support, their chances of becoming entrepreneurs can remain the same.”

Zhang is presenting his latest study at the prestigious annual meeting of the Academy of Management next week in Montreal. He completed the research with colleagues from Michigan State University and the National University of Singapore. They surveyed about 1,400 female pairs of fraternal and identical twins, asking them various questions about their childhoods and work history to help find out whether genetic influences on entrepreneurship are fixed or whether they can be weakened or strengthened by social environment. Statistical analyses showed parental divorce, [family violence](#) and [physical abuse](#) all significantly weaken the genetic influences on girls becoming entrepreneurs.

“Even though DNA is fixed, it needs human behavior to manifest itself,” Zhang said. “It’s the same thing for someone genetically inclined to be a scientist or an artist - they still need to be nurtured through social and environmental factors. Girls who have a supportive environment during adolescence will be more likely to reach their full genetic potential as entrepreneurs, while those affected by negative, stressful events can have their natural genetic disposition weakened.”

Zhang did earlier research on genetics and entrepreneurship published in the academic journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* last year. It explains that genetic influence has no bearing on whether boys become entrepreneurs, but many social factors, including family influence, do prompt men to own businesses. For girls, genetic factors play a role in determining personality traits such as extroversion and emotional stability, and those traits can help sway whether girls become entrepreneurs. However, this new research adds the wrinkle that [childhood trauma](#) can still impede that genetic influence on [girls](#).

Zhang hopes policymakers will use his research to focus on programs that will help shore up the social and [environmental factors](#) encouraging teens to become entrepreneurs.

“We want to make society better,” Zhang said. “We want to be clear that genes don’t determine everything, so we can provide training programs and other opportunities to help open up kids’ eyes to the possibility of working for themselves.”

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: Childhood trauma could hurt girls' goals of entrepreneurship (2010, August 5) retrieved 1 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-08-childhood-trauma-girls-goals-entrepreneurship.html>

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