

Positive Stress and Reflective Practice Enhancing Innovativeness Among Entrepreneurs

Kati Tikkamäki¹, Päivi Heikkilä², Mari Ainasoja¹

¹School of Information Sciences, University of Tampere, Finland

²VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland Ltd., Tampere, Finland

kati.tikkamaki@uta.fi

paivi.heikkila@vtt.fi

mari.ainasoja@uta.fi

Abstract: The heavy stress load and the need for innovativeness seem to be unavoidable aspects of entrepreneurship. Yet, the positive side of stress, often referred to as ‘eustress’, and its potential in boosting innovativeness have remained understudied areas. As a tool for analysing and developing thoughts and actions, reflective practice has the potential to play an important role both in interpretations essential to positive stress experiences and in innovations described as learning processes. Our aim is to contribute to entrepreneurship and innovativeness research by combining the research streams of eustress and reflective practice. First, we shed light on how entrepreneurs experience the role of positive stress and reflective practice in their work. Then, we provide a description of the reflective tools that entrepreneurs utilize in promoting eustress and innovativeness. The research process is designed to support reflective dialogue among the participants, which included 21 Finnish entrepreneurs from different fields. The results are mainly based on qualitative interviews. Nine of the interviewed entrepreneurs recorded also a positive stress diary, including a three-day physiological measurement analysing their heartbeat variability. The results were interpreted together with these entrepreneurs in additional interviews, which enrich the original data. Our findings suggest that positive stress and reflective practice are intertwined in the experiences of entrepreneurs. However, the capabilities for reflection vary, and the theory-driven division of reflective practice into individual, social and contextual dimensions is useful for understanding differences between entrepreneurs. The results illustrate how reflective practice forms a crucial toolbox for promoting positive stress. This toolbox consists of the following six tools: studying oneself, changing one’s point of view, putting things into perspective, harnessing a feeling of trust, regulating the resources and engaging in dialogue. In sum, this research works as a starting point in exploring the connections of eustress and reflective practice to the innovativeness of entrepreneurs.

Keywords: eustress, reflective practice, innovativeness, entrepreneurship

1. Introduction – eustress, reflectivity and innovativeness

The quest for innovativeness is frequently present in the literature of entrepreneurship. It has been said that creating and maintaining innovativeness requires curiosity, dialogue, and creative thinking (Martins and Terblanche 2003). When examining entrepreneurs as ‘innovative entrepreneurs’, previous studies have suggested that they engage in information-seeking with a motivation to change the status quo and are less susceptible to certain status quo biases (Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen 2008). Passion for work and being innovative are common characteristics of entrepreneurs (Frese 2009).

In addition to innovativeness, stress seems to be an almost equally present ingredient of entrepreneurship. Kuratko (2007) even calls it one of the darker sides of entrepreneurial leadership. Entrepreneurs are typically viewed as the subjects of stress due to heavy workloads, the assumption of risk in their business activities (Palmer 1971) and a higher-than-average need for achievement (Langan-Fox and Roth 1995). On the other hand, high stress tolerance is seen as one of the strengths of entrepreneurial personality (Frese 2009). Rahim (1996) found that entrepreneurs reported a higher internal locus of control than managers and were thus in a position to manage stress more effectively.

The positive side of stress, eustress, has received far less attention in entrepreneurship literature than negative stress. Although this beneficial side of stress was already recognized a few decades ago (Lazarus 1966, Selye 1974), it has been neglected in recent research. Several authors have called for further research on eustress in work-life settings (Simmons and Nelson 2007; Hargrove et al. 2013; Le Fevre, Matheny and Kolt 2003). Considering the widely agreed role of stress in entrepreneurship, research is especially important in an entrepreneurial context. Recent research suggests that both positive and negative affect may contribute to actual transformations of reality by influencing creativity, innovation and change-oriented behaviour (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller and Staw 2005; Anderson, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2004; George and Zhou, 2002). While distress has been seen to hinder creativity and innovativeness (Amabile et al. 2005), in this paper we suggest

that exploring entrepreneurship from this new perspective of positive stress might contribute to understanding the innovativeness of entrepreneurs.

The key in the concept of eustress is that the responses to stressors are dependent on one's perception of the situation and can thus be interpreted either positively or negatively (Hargrove et al. 2013). Reflectivity plays an important role in this interpretation. In addition to this key role in experiencing positive stress, there is a broad consensus among learning theorists that reflection is at the core of adult learning and professional growth, transformation and empowerment (Boud et al. 1985; Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). For this reason, the capacity and willingness for reflection are considered crucial when aiming at innovations, which we see as learning processes. Due to these links between reflection and both eustress and innovations, it is possible to consider reflective practice as a tool for harnessing the boost from eustress for the benefit of innovativeness.

The paper is part of a larger research project called Eustress. The main goal of the project is to create knowledge for recognizing, stimulating and utilizing eustress at work. In this paper, our aim is to contribute to the entrepreneurship and innovativeness research by combining the research streams of eustress and reflective practice. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How do entrepreneurs experience the role of positive stress and reflective practice in their work and renewal?
2. What kind of tools for reflective practice do entrepreneurs utilize in order to savour positive stress?

2. Research methods and data

Our approach is qualitative and multi-methodological – combining interviews, physiological measurements, diary keeping and reflective dialogue between participants. The principles of reflective practice guided the research process, which was also designed to work as a reflective process for the participants. Based on openness and dialogue, the interviews challenged entrepreneurs to analyse their ways of thinking and doing. In addition, participants had the opportunity to participate in two peer-mentoring groups during the research process and reflect on their experiences with the other participants.

The process of data collection and analysis proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, 21 entrepreneurs were interviewed face-to-face. The two-hour interviews were semi-structured but open, concentrating on the entrepreneurs' personal experiences of positive stress. The questions related specifically to reflective practice were as follows: *Do you think over and analyse your working habits and behaviour from the point of view of stress or wellbeing? If so, how do you do it? What have you learned about yourself and stress management during your entrepreneurship?* From the transcribed interviews, the parts of data describing reflection and reflective practice were first coded into four categories based on the theories of reflection: capabilities and willingness to reflect, and individual, social and contextual dimensions of reflective practice. Then these categories were further analysed to discover reflective tools that entrepreneurs see as being meaningful in managing positive stress.

In the second phase, nine of the interviewed entrepreneurs recorded a positive stress diary, including a three-day physiological measurement analysing their heartbeat variability. The researchers walked the entrepreneurs through the results during a second face-to-face interview which explored how entrepreneurs themselves interpret and describe the eustress experiences reflected in diary notes and physiological data. The interview data was again transcribed and coded based on the theories of reflection.

The participating 21 entrepreneurs were all 30–52-year-old Finns, and most of them had a small company with fewer than 10 employees. Entrepreneurs represented different fields from consulting and education to the building industry and software design. The majority of entrepreneurs were relatively new entrepreneurs – twelve of them had worked as an entrepreneur for less than five years. When asked to describe themselves as entrepreneurs, eleven of them described themselves with a word related to innovativeness and/or creativity (e.g. forerunner, curious, risk taker, enthusiastic, visionary).

3. Eustress – boosting stress

Stress experiences can be divided into harmful (distress) and beneficial (eustress) (Selye 1974). Both stress situations are triggered by the fight or flight response. The stress reaction itself is basically the same for all stress factors (Hynynen 2011): the sympathetic nervous system becomes activated, thereby raising the heart rate and stroke power, increasing respiration frequency and resulting in a higher concentration of adrenaline

in the blood. The cortisol blood glucose levels increase. Normally, stress reaction is a temporal response that helps the body to adapt to changes and survive threats. In its positive form, stress increases dopamine and oxytocin in the body. Due to these 'feel good' hormones, attention and enthusiasm increases and the individual may gain a physiological sense of well-being.

When coping skills are inadequate, stress raises negative feelings and lowers the work performance. According to the classical definition of distress, it 'occurs when an individual perceives that the demands of an external situation are beyond his or her perceived ability to cope with them' (Lazarus 1966). Long-term distress can be harmful and heavily detrimental to the health and well-being of an individual. Job-related stress is linked to a reduction of individual performance (Jamal 1990) and has also been observed hindering creativity and innovativeness (Amabile et al. 2005).

Plenty of research has been conducted on the construct of stress, but far less exists on eustress. Due to the limited amount of existing research, the phenomenon has not been clearly conceptualized. However, the current understanding emphasises the meaning of the interpretation of stressors: The responses to stressors are dependent on one's perception of the situation and thus can be interpreted either positively, negatively or a combination of the two (Hargrove et al. 2013). Currently, eustress and distress are seen as separate qualitative constructs, and not as the ends of the same continuum (Simmons and Nelson, 2007).

The experience of eustress can culminate in flow, 'the epitome of eustress' (Hargrove et al., 2013). In flow, the individual is fully focused and extremely motivated on the work task – so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Another concept related to eustress is work engagement, which is defined as a positive, relatively stable, affective-motivational state of fulfilment at work (Schaufeli et al. 2002).

Both forms of stress – eustress and distress – are inevitable aspects of life and are thus necessary. Perception and interpretation both play a crucial role in stress reactions – they define when the stress is experienced as being debilitating and when it is empowering.

4. About reflection and reflective practice

Reflection plays an important role in eustress. It is a tool used to interpret stress/pressure experiences and a core process of conscious learning.

Numerous definitions exist for reflection, depending on the ontological and epistemological premises of the definer. Reflection is often visualized as a bridge between experience and learning (Boud et al. 1985). It is a meta-competence, a competency that is beyond other competencies and which enables individuals to monitor and/or develop other competencies (Cheetham and Chivers 1998). It refers to the ability to 'learn to learn' and to think 'outside the box'. In the context of the workplace, reflection is a powerful tool for problem solving, changing tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and examining practice and routines (Schön 1983; Argyris and Schön, 1996; Boud et al. 2006).

Reflection is often related to an *individual's* cognitive processes, such as becoming aware, evaluating, questioning, criticising experiences, assumptions, beliefs, practices and emotions. Reflection has been seen as a process of seeking understanding. (Mezirow 1981; Schön 1983; Raelin 2001.) In addition to this individual reflection, it is essential to focus on how individuals engage in *collective* reflection (Boud 1985; Raelin 2001). When reflecting collectively (e.g. with colleagues), it is situated in processes of interaction, sharing opinions, asking for feedback, challenging groupthink and collective experimentation and innovation. This dimension of reflection can be called 'reflective dialogue' (Tsang 2007; Hilden and Tikkamäki 2013). In addition to these individual and collective dimensions, *contextual factors* are related to reflection. Organisational structures, practices and culture are the contextual factors studied most often from this perspective (Elkjaer 2001; Jordan 2010). A crucial question is how reflection is organized and knit into everyday work. A similar division can also be found in the literature of creativity and innovativeness. Individual factors, interaction between the different individuals and contextual factors (e.g. *physical work environment, time pressures*) all have an impact on creativity (Oldham and Cummings 1996; Shalley, Zhou and Oldham 2004).

Reflectivity is often defined as reflective practice. At its best, reflectivity is a state of mind or an orientation leading to reflective practice. Reflective practice is a capacity to reflect on action (Schön 1983) to improve your

work. It is an active, dynamic, action-based and ethical set of skills, placed in real time and dealing with real, complex and difficult situations (Bright 1996). Reflective practice is a complex emotional and intellectual process that calls for self-awareness, self-regulation and interaction with others. Reflecting on different approaches of doing work and reshaping the understanding of past and current experiences will lead to improvement in work practices (Leitch and Day 2000). It also promotes modifying skills to suit specific contexts and situations, and eventually to invent new strategies (Larrivee 2000).

5. Toolbox of reflective practice promoting eustress

Among the interviewed entrepreneurs, the phenomenon of experiencing positive stress was recognised by everyone. Enthusiasm and positive experiences linked to eustress were even seen as reasons to be an entrepreneur, leading one to feel that work was rewarding. The entrepreneurs described their eustress experiences as a state of enjoyment and productivity. Positive stress makes the work feel effortless. According to one entrepreneur, 'It is like dancing on the water. Like getting wings ... Things are solved although there is some pressure. Or I'd claim that they are solved because of the pressure' (female, 38 years old, consulting).

In addition to individual achievements, positive stress was often linked to social situations, where the insecurity and meaningfulness of the situation and joint enthusiasm facilitated experiencing eustress. One entrepreneur stated as follows: 'I feel it is more important that the crew is in such a state [of eustress], not the individual' (male, 45 years old, digital consulting).

In our study, the entrepreneurs' experiences of eustress were analysed by identifying tools they use for recognising and stimulating positive stress, and for balancing positive and negative stress. Based on the categorization of the collected data, six eustress toolboxes were found. Among them, reflective practice was identified as one of the key toolboxes to promote eustress. In the next chapters, we present the dimensions and content of this toolbox.

5.1 Capability and willingness to reflect

The capability and willingness to reflect varied among the entrepreneurs. Those who were not reflectively oriented told that they act mainly based on their intuition. However, many of the entrepreneurs regularly used reflective ways of thinking and working and believed this practice was beneficial. Entrepreneurs from the training and consulting sectors, in particular, seemed to have internalised reflective practice as a way of analysing past experiences and oneself. One entrepreneur shared the following observation:

You sit on the plane and start to think what happened during the past three days. You start to list down that this went well, this went well, this is a bit unfinished, and this is where we flopped and the reasons for it ... I analyse my environment, and myself, and I know my strengths and weaknesses, and actually, there are plenty of weaknesses... (male, 52 years old, pet shop entrepreneur)

Most of the participants of this study were interested in developing their work practices, and the study itself made them reflect on their ways of working and thinking. The dialogue with researchers, writing down their experiences and interpreting physiological data all supported a reflective orientation. For example, one entrepreneur first thought that eustress refers to enthusiastic puppy-like rushing around; however, after participating in all research steps, he realised that eustress actually is most likely to occur when he remains calm and truly concentrates on his doings.

For another entrepreneur, the involvement in the research process was a trigger to think about her life situation on a broader scale:

The thing that got me to think about my feelings in this study was asking, 'Does it make any sense just to rush around and neglect your well-being all the time?' ... I've been thinking on a wider scale what carries me on. And I've been listening to others about what they tell about themselves and their recovery (female, 49 years old, consulting).

5.2 Individual, social and contextual dimensions of reflective practice

Both individual and social dimensions of reflective practice were found from the data, but the emphasis was on individual reflection. Many entrepreneurs told that they analyse and consciously think over their ways of thinking and doing, as illustrated by the following two excerpts:

I'm not sure whether it is self-analysis, but you need to be, all the time, a bit conscious of where you are going. Because it [stress] gets you so easily, negative stress especially (female, 43 years old, cleaning services).

The data contained many examples of the social dimension of reflective practice, too. In practice, it meant discussing and analysing with colleagues, professionals and close people. As the following two excerpts suggest, reflective dialogue also took place in joint innovation.

I think it is a part of our way of working, all the time, embedded in it. ...The idea of continuous reflection is in our backbones...I think we do it every day; we think whether we could do this better or whether a way of doing things is a practical or appropriate one (female, 46 years old, training/consulting).

Contextual factors were also identified to have an impact on reflective practice. The examples from the entrepreneurs' experiences were related to an inspiring work environment and the importance of occasionally changing the environment to see things from different angles. Some entrepreneurs told that they struggle with time for reflection, while some had explicitly allocated time for it, for example, by reserving one day a week for developing oneself.

5.3 The toolbox of reflective practice

The toolbox of reflective practice consists of the following six reflective tools:

1. Studying oneself
2. Changing one's point of view
3. Putting things into perspective
4. Harnessing a feeling of trust
5. Regulating resources
6. Engaging in dialogue

Studying oneself (tool 1) means, in practice, that the entrepreneurs recognized, analysed and evaluated their ways of thinking and doing. Changing one's point of view (2) refers to examining situations and experiences open-mindedly from different perspectives (e.g. the clients' perspective) and especially from a positive point of view. For example, seeing a failure as a potential guide for learning is one way to detect the positive. Putting things into perspective (3) relates to thinking about life on a broader scale and, for example, remembering that business is only one dimension of life. Harnessing a feeling of trust (4) refers to trusting oneself as a professional and trusting the future. Building confidence in one's own abilities also includes having mercy on oneself, allowing oneself to occasionally say no and avoiding making decisions in order to please others. Regulating resources (5) refers to estimating where to get involved and justifying and prioritizing one's own actions. On one hand, you have to harness the enthusiasm, and on the other, you have to be mindful of working too much without recovery. Engaging in dialogue (6) – with professionals, colleagues, friends or family – refers to talking aloud and sharing ideas, experiences and feelings.

The entrepreneurs implemented these six tools by externalizing their thinking, experiences and feelings in different ways. For example, they made lists or visualized their ideas and/or goals, thought aloud and/or asked questions. During the research process, reflective practice resulted in new insights regarding beneficial or harmful ways of thinking and working. Many of the entrepreneurs realized the importance of sufficient recovery and sleep and recalled ways to recoup from stress.

Reflective practice refers to entrepreneurs' ways to recognize, stimulate and/or balance with eustress. It enables you to learn about yourself and from your own experiences, both individually and with others. The reflective practice toolbox is summarized in figure 1 below.

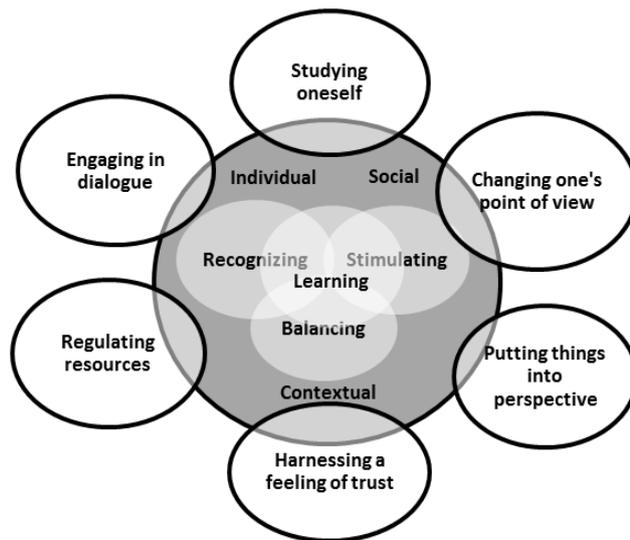


Figure 1: Toolbox of reflective practice promoting eustress among the entrepreneurs.

6. Discussion - Eustress and reflective practice boosting innovativeness

Among the interviewed entrepreneurs, eustress, i.e. the beneficial side of stress, was seen as a state of enjoyment and productivity worth aspiring towards. Entrepreneurs had their own personal ways to strive for eustress experiences, and one of the key means for doing so was reflective practice. Based on the experiences of the entrepreneurs, the toolbox of reflective practice to facilitate eustress experiences was created. The toolbox consists of the following six reflective tools: studying oneself, changing one's point of view, putting things into perspective, harnessing a feeling of trust, regulating resources and engaging in dialogue.

At its best, the reflective practice tools promote creativity and innovativeness. In earlier research, the benefits of reflective practice in idea generation have been recognized (Dahl & Moreau 2002; Hey, Linsey, Agogino & Wood 2008). Reflective practice leads to a change in the view of self, values and beliefs. It focuses on gaining a new perspective, rather than just solving problems. This process opens up individuals' possibility to learn, renew their habits and ways of thinking and generate new ideas.

The earlier theory of reflective practice also proved to be applicable in the context of entrepreneurs and positive stress. The division into individual, social and contextual dimensions, used earlier both in the literature of reflective practice and creativity, helped in analysing the differences of entrepreneurs.

In connection to eustress and innovativeness, the results show reflective practice as a tool for stimulating good practices but also as a tool to survive and learn from drawbacks and experienced failures/success. Through reflective practice it is possible to get more grounded self-knowledge and to learn to find a personally suitable level of eustress as well the best ways to recover. It is a way to learn to regulate the workload and one's own activity in terms of resources at hand. Eustress can secure the psychological and physical resources that can be harnessed for innovativeness. This study works only as a starting point to explore the connections between eustress and reflective practice and the innovativeness of entrepreneurs. Finding more solid empirical evidence for this connection will prove to be an important endeavour in the future.

A central future research question is how the reflective tools can be taught and learned as a part of everyday work. Reflective practice is seen as a developable capacity in the literature. Finding the most efficient ways to assimilate these reflective practices into everyday work and maintaining these habits is the real challenge. Reflective practice and positive stress are linked to many existing concepts, and these links can be further elaborated in future research. One example of these concepts is psychological capital which, based on Jensen (2012), might be the key to understanding entrepreneurial stress.

Both the strengths and limitations of this study lie in the qualitative and reflective research approach. It provided solid benefits for this research, but statistical generalizations to all entrepreneurs cannot be drawn based on this data. Although this qualitative and highly interpretative data gives valuable insights, quantitative approaches would also be interesting. The entrepreneurs in this study were Finnish and represented (mostly) rather small firms. International, cross-cultural research could enrich the picture in the future.

7. Conclusions

Results suggest that positive stress and reflective practice are intertwined in the experiences of entrepreneurs. The division of reflective practice to individual, social and contextual dimensions is useful for understanding differences between entrepreneurs. The reflective practice forms a crucial toolbox for promoting positive stress. This toolbox consists of the following six reflective tools: studying oneself, changing one's point of view, putting things into perspective, harnessing a feeling of trust, regulating the resources and engaging in dialogue. It is useful for enhancing recognition and stimulation of eustress; in balancing between distress, eustress and recovery; and for developing ways of thinking and doing through learning. Overall, interplay between eustress and reflective practice seems to contribute to both well-being and innovativeness.

This research sheds light on how tools based on reflective practice and eustress can be utilized in supporting entrepreneurs in their efforts for effective but innovative work. It works as a starting point in exploring the connections between eustress and reflective practice and the innovativeness of entrepreneurs.

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