

Managing effective labor market entry: proactive coping and self-employment intention among Polish small business owners

Managing
effective labor
market entry

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Abstract

Purpose – Self-employment is considered one of the responses to precarious employment, particularly among those who lost jobs during an economic crisis. Although starting a new business is widely available, operating new ventures remains challenging. This article aims to explore the premises of self-employment success, namely self-employment intention and proactive coping as crucial predictors of further performance.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors recruited participants among initially unemployed individuals who participated in the entrepreneurial program aimed at creating self-employment. Since entrepreneurs are expected to have specific personal characteristics important for performance, the authors assessed proactive coping as the key factor for self-employment intention.

Findings – The results depicted proactive coping as crucial in performing own ventures in the long run, which suggests that self-employment intention may change over time.

Practical implications – Proactive coping is particularly appropriate for self-employed at any stage of the entrepreneurial process because it maintains the intention to perform own business. Thus, the findings underline the need for proactive coping training for entrepreneurs, particularly those previously unemployed.

Originality/value – As the self-employment intention may differ in time, the importance of being proactive in operating small businesses increases.

Keywords Self-employment intention, Proactive coping, Entrepreneurship, Self-employment performance

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Self-employment is mentioned as one of the employment possibilities that keep the unemployment rate at a low level. European governments, including that of Poland, have adopted similar policies toward growth and job creation, and unemployment reduction (Berggren & Olofsson, 2019; Grigorescu, Pirciog, & Lincaru, 2020). European Union policy promotes programs focused on active measures like direct job creation and start-up incentives (European Commission, 2021). Although some studies (Grigorescu *et al.*, 2020) argue an ambiguous relation between self-employment and unemployment, the unemployed

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are subjected to policies in terms of increased self-employment (OECD/European Union, 2019). The study described in this article focused on initially unemployed individuals who participated in the entrepreneurial program aimed at creating self-employment.

Statistics show the current unemployment rate in Poland (3.2%) as the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2021a). One of the noticeable changes in the local labor market regarding the Covid-19 pandemic is the decrease in the number of employed workers and the increase in self-employed workers. Governmental support provides the self-employed with specific instruments like benefits, exemption from contributions and nonreturnable loans.

In the face of precarious employment, the government promotes sole proprietorship, particularly among those who are endangered by job loss or who lost their jobs during the crisis. Poland is located at the top of the European Union countries regarding entrepreneurship. The Polish labor market analysis revealed that 17% of the workforce is currently self-employed (Eurostat, 2021b), including 8% of entrepreneurs who are sole traders. The number of own business runners increased primarily after the outbreak of the pandemic. One possible reason for such entrepreneurial development might be in organizations' cost-cutting strategies that encourage employees to change their employment contracts into B2B contracts. Nevertheless, self-employment continues to be considered an important factor in economic development and employment increase. The processes observed in Poland are like those appearing in other Central and Eastern European countries. Thus, Poland may be considered representative of this region (Sanocka & Kurpisz, 2003).

Although the available subsidies provide a high rate of entrepreneurial success during the first 12 months, in subsequent breakthrough stages – running a business for 24, 36 and 48 months in market conditions – the share of inactive ventures increases up to 50% (WUP, 2021). Following the labor market statistics (WUP, 2022), the self-employment success among previously unemployed dropped to 48% after the subsidy expired. Thus, we should ask what factors might increase positive self-employment outcomes, namely prolonged time of performing a new venture that would exceed the obligatory period of maintaining a business activity regulated by subsidies. Our study sought an answer by focusing on individual factors, particularly proactive coping and self-employment intentions. Most of the training for entrepreneurs concentrates on increasing their knowledge of how to start a new venture yet has no direct effect on shaping entrepreneurial intentions (Duong, 2021; Nowiński, Haddoud, Wach, & Schaefer, 2020). However, the training for previously unemployed does not sufficiently motivate them to take the initiative and pursue long-lasting ventures. Thus, our study analyzed the role of proactive coping in self-employment intention more closely.

We applied the concept of proactive coping to understand its relation to self-employment intentions, which leads to more positive entrepreneurial outcomes, meaning small business survival. Building on the proactive coping approach (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991); we further explore the psychological factors – particularly self-efficacy and social support – in the specific context of starting a new venture with respect to self-employment intention.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Research framework

To start their businesses, individuals are expected to have specific characteristics and skills important for performance (Simoes, Crespo, & Moreira, 2016). This study aimed to explore the predictors of self-employment success. Deriving from entrepreneurship research (Baron, 2000, 2007; Frese, Hass, & Friedrich, 2016), the person most likely to succeed in business ownership is to be active, self-started and future-oriented. Specifically, Baron and Henry (2011) underline motivation, opportunity recognition and resource acquisition as stages

leading to entrepreneurial success. In accordance, [Frese and Gielnik \(2014\)](#) point to personal initiative and a proactive approach as central elements of entrepreneurship.

Prior research ([Nabi & Holden, 2008](#); [Wolfe & Patel, 2018](#)) revealed self-employment intentions as an important premise for developing a new business. Our study focused on self-employment intentions reported by the unemployed as a predictor of future performance, using the TPB ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) as a framework to study engagement in performing self-employment in the long run. The TPB foregrounds intention to act leads to a specific behavior ([Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997](#)).

Considering the critical role of self-employment intentions, the necessity of exploring its psychological and contextual correlates seems crucial in predicting business owners' success ([Baluku, Bantu, & Otto, 2018](#)). Given that turning intention into action is regulated by self-regulation mechanisms ([Bandura, 1997](#)) like self-efficacy and future orientation, we further proposed that proactive coping ([Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997](#)) and self-efficacy beliefs ([Bandura, 1997](#)) might be related to self-employment intentions. Assuming that starting a new venture is a severe stressor for a person, additional coping – particularly task-focused – might play a significant role among initially unemployed entrepreneurs. Moreover, performing a new business, in the long run, requires specific skills, namely strategic planning and taking the initiative, thus proactive coping is likely to have a profound effect on self-employment intention and own business success in a longer time perspective. Therefore, our study explored the role of proactive behaviors in entrepreneurial intention among initially unemployed individuals participating in the entrepreneurial program.

Overall, this article contributes to our understanding of self-employment in two ways. First, we perceive self-employment intention as a critical determinant of entrepreneurial success and therefore highlight the differences in intentions of unemployed entrepreneurs who participate in the entrepreneurial program. We compare the self-employment intentions of participants who start and finish the program. Second, we describe how self-employment intention relates to proactive coping.

2.2 Self-employment intention and ownership success

Prior research ([Ajzen, 1991](#); [Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997](#)) showed intention to act as the main predictor of behavior. Based on the TPB ([Ajzen, 1991](#)), the intention is described as the decision or motivation to perform the behavior. Furthermore, the intention is considered behavior's critical determinant, thus playing a central role in predicting future enterprises. In other words, the stronger the intention, the more likely the behavior will be performed with higher intensity. Applying the entrepreneurship approach, individuals with stronger self-employment intentions create and lead their businesses more effectively ([Baluku et al., 2018](#)).

Intentions are usually assessed using one or two general items ([Vinokur & Caplan, 1987](#); [Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005](#)). However, some researchers ([Ajzen, 1991](#); [Van Hoof, Born, Taxis, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004](#)) underline the importance of specificity, target or situation in assessing intentions. Therefore, our study employed a list of various intentions for entrepreneurial performance and asked participants to indicate what activity related to the launched venture they intend to perform. We distinguished adaptive self-employment intentions – performing own business in a short (within 1.5 years) and longtime perspective (more than 1.5 years) – and maladaptive self-employment intentions, namely self-employment exit to employment or unemployment. This way of intention measurement allowed for a multifaceted assessment of self-employment intention. Although self-employment is increasing, some entrepreneurs wish to work as employees. In recent years 15.7% of all small-business owners had the intention to quit and change self-employment for employment ([Eurostat, 2018](#)). Labor market demands and contextual conditions can cause strain, frustration and disappointment, further decreasing self-employment success.

Our study proposed proactive coping as a factor that could enhance performance, creativity, opportunity recognition and resource accumulation. This kind of coping can lead to a higher intention to operate own venture and generate positive entrepreneurial outcomes.

2.3 Proactive coping and self-employment intentions

Entrepreneurship research (Shane, Locke, & Collins, 2003; Baron, 2006) claims that the effectiveness of a venture is based on creative thinking, recognizing a business opportunity, acting innovation and productive behavior. In this context, many emphasize personal aspects – namely motivation and competence – as positively relating to small business growth (Baum, Locke, & Smith, 2001; Lee & Tsang, 2001). Among other things, entrepreneurship competence comprises the ability to create opportunity, while motivation refers to expectations (Muthalib, Ruslan, & Yulianti, 2018). There is a need for specific competencies to develop and perform new ventures successfully. Frese (2009), Frese *et al.* (2016) underlines personal initiative as an important characteristic of successful business owners. Personal initiative comprises self-starting, proactivity and overcoming difficulties (Frese & Fay, 2001). Our study focused on proactive behaviors, particularly proactive coping related to the development of initiative, namely self-employment intention.

Proactive coping is defined as a specific form of problem-focused coping. Proactive individuals act to prevent stressful events or better cope with potential stressors (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009). This kind of coping aims to prepare individuals by strengthening their capabilities for managing situations in advance. Thus, the stressors should be omitted or limited in their effect. Resources accumulation (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), anticipation, goal setting, planning and reflection (Searle & Lee, 2015) are outlined as crucial components of proactive coping that helps to gain and maintain control of one's environment. Thus, proactive copers can deal with current demands as well as potential future difficulties. Since creating a new venture is a significant source of stressful events (Ellis *et al.*, 2015), proactive coping is a promising pretender for improving self-employment performance. Considering proactive coping as a remedial strategy, greater skills at performing proactive coping might lead to a higher level of self-employment intention, involving expectations about operating one's small business.

Merging the process model of entrepreneurship (Baron & Henry, 2011) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), we presumed the importance of proactive coping in generating and implementing self-employment intention. Therefore, we assumed that proactive coping is related to adaptive self-employment intentions.

- H1.* Proactive coping is positively related to the intention of performing own business and negatively associated with the intention of self-employment exit.

2.4 Predictors of self-employment intention

Drawing from the process model of entrepreneurship (Baron & Henry, 2011) that links industrial and organizational psychology and entrepreneurship research, creating and leading new ventures comprises four stages: motivation, opportunity recognition, acquiring resources and entrepreneurial performance. These stages come in three phases: prelaunch, launch and postlaunch. Accordingly, intention generating might be considered a process that involves the preintentional phase, comprising motivation that leads to behavioral intention and postintentional volition, causing a specific behavior (Sniehotta, Nagy, Scholz, & Schwarzer, 2006). Some support the relation between intention and behavior in a general and narrow context (Sniehotta *et al.*, 2006; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & van der Flier, 2005). The post-intentional constructs like self-regulatory mechanisms (e.g. self-efficacy, strategic planning, taking the initiative) are crucial in this relation, as factors enable further intention implementation.

2.4.1 Self-efficacy. Deriving from the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), individuals undertake an action in line with their intention to the extent of their resources that help perform the behavior and overcome the possible difficulties. The importance of self-regulation in realizing the goal intentions has been underlined by Gollwitzer and Brandstätter (1997), in their intention implementation approach. When the perceived behavioral control is high, one's intention is a strong predictor of the behavior. Perceived behavioral control is linked to perceived self-efficacy, which is considered critical, e.g. when dealing with stress, such as starting a new business. This concept is defined as one's belief in their ability to cope with stressful or challenging situations (Bandura, 1997). What follows is that individuals believe they can change a situation and their behavior can produce a favorable outcome. Based on the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), general self-efficacy refers to individuals' global confidence in their coping ability, which could explain the behaviors and coping outcomes among less specific contexts. Research on self-efficacy supports the positive relation between general self-efficacy and appraising stressful events positively as challenging (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005).

In our study, we focused on individuals in a specific context of starting a new venture. Efficacy expectations were described as the conviction that one can successfully execute the required behavior to produce intended outcomes. Outcome expectancies refer to the subjective estimation that a given behavior will lead to specific outcomes. Summarizing, self-efficacy is perceived as fundamental for the intention to act in a certain way (Lent & Brown, 2013). Self-efficacy is particularly depicted as promoting entrepreneurship and fostering the intention to activate a behavior, e.g. operating self-employment (Nowiński *et al.*, 2020; Kisubi, Bonuke, & Korir, 2021). Thus, we assumed that self-efficacy is strongly related to adaptive self-employment intention.

H2. Self-efficacy is positively related to the intention of performing own business and negatively related to the intention of self-employment exit.

2.4.2 Social support. Individuals translate their intention into action when they assess personal resources and received social support as ample to enable entrepreneurial behavior (Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2016). There are several perspectives on why social support should help launch new ventures. A meta-analytical study (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999) revealed that social support can buffer the effects of stressors. Based on the organizational socialization approach (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007), the initial period in the new workplace is related to a higher level of insecurity and disorientation. Together with the experience of reality shock, it can lead to unsuccessful performance, lower job satisfaction and higher intention to quit (Jusoh, Simun, & Chong, 2011). In such circumstances, the received social support might be one of the significant factors that maintain one's performance on a satisfactory level. Considering self-employment as a new job with a new workspace, we may observe similar effects. Thus, we assumed that social support would be related to self-employment intentions.

H3. Social support is positively related to performing own business and negatively related to the intention of self-employment exit.

2.4.3 Contextual factor. Our study participants attended entrepreneurial training dedicated to supporting the unemployed toward self-employment. Volunteers participated in the governmental program aimed at promoting self-employment. The timeframes for the program were 1.5 years. They were obligated to create a small business and operate a new venture for at least 1.5 years during this time frame. They were involved in training focused on improving entrepreneurial skills and promoting self-employment. Participants were trained in entrepreneurship, strategic planning (e.g. creating a professional business plan),

launching a new venture and performing at the post-launch stage. They attended counseling sessions that included coaching, career counseling and formal aspects of self-employment.

However, while performing and becoming more involved in the new venture, the formal support program ends at one point, and the self-employed become more exposed to actual labor market demands and negative experiences like disappointment, frustration and tension (Ślebarska & Soucek, 2020). Our study assessed whether someone intends to perform their own business in the short (during the 1.5-year training) or long run (after the training), change self-employment to employment or return to unemployment. We further compared the level of distinguished intentions among entrepreneurs who started and finished the entrepreneurial program. Considering the possible previews at the beginning of the training that can change over time (Ślebarska & Soucek, 2020) and the current context (the Covid-19 pandemic), we assumed that the perceived expectations of self-employment success change over time. More precisely, we hypothesized that the level of positive self-employment intentions (performing own business) might differ among those who start and finish the training.

H4. The levels of self-employment intentions differ among entrepreneurs in the launch and postlaunch phase.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

The cross-sectional sample comprised 66 unemployed workers registered in the local job center in Lesser Poland, Poland's southern region. All participants were included in the program, which supported self-employment among the previously unemployed, donated by European funding and organized by one of the Polish Agencies conducting advisory and information activities for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and people intending to start a business. The offered program included information, consulting, financial and training services for the unemployed who planned to start their own business (self-employment). The program was designed as a complex training that comprised, e.g. labor market orientation, entrepreneurship, personal change management, time self-management, networking, interpersonal communication and modern technology usage. The total number of program participants was 67 individuals, partitioned into smaller training groups containing 6–12 attendees. All participants were included in the study, while 66 of them returned completed questionnaires and were further analyzed. Overall, 59.7% of the sample was female, reflecting female predominance in the nationwide group structure of the nonworking (approximately 60%; Statistics Poland, 2019). The project was addressed to the unemployed aged 30 and more, unemployed for at least 12 months and interested in starting their own business. Participants were aged between 30 and 65 years, and the mean age was 43.23 years (standard deviations (*SD*) = 11.40), while the average duration of prior unemployment was 18.02 months (*SD* = 25.24). The category of recent job declared by respondents included 11.9% professional/technical, 10.2% managerial, 8.5% sales, 8.5% office/clerical, 23.7% craft/operatives, 27.1% laborers and 10.2% service workers.

The respondents were partitioned into two groups, starting with self-employment (G1) and continuing with self-employment (G2), meaning the assessments happened at the time of program entry (G1, *N* = 45) and the final stage (G2, *N* = 21). Next, we compared the results obtained in G1 with results from G2. All participants were informed about the anonymity of data collection, meaning that their data would be analyzed collectively and no information would be provided to third parties. They were assured that there were no wrong answers and that all their opinions were important. Respondents were also informed about the purpose of the study, namely proactive coping and self-employment outcomes. The study was fully

anonymous, and the data was gathered only among volunteers who agreed to participate in the study. No person-related data were collected to ensure the participants' anonymity. Prior to participation, they were informed about the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time and without any consequences.

3.2 Measures

Self-employment intention was assessed with four items. Participants were asked whether they intend to (1) run their own business for 1.5 years, (2) further developed self-employment, (3) change self-employment to being employed by another employer or (4) become unemployed. Each item was separately analyzed. Based on previous research intention can be adequately represented by a single item (Vinokur & Caplan, 1987). Responses for this item ranged from 1 = "not at all true" to 4 = "exactly true." Higher scores indicated higher levels of intention.

Proactive coping was assessed using the 14-item proactive coping scale from the proactive coping inventory, Polish version (Pasikowski, Sek, Greenglass, & Taubert, 2002). The sample item read "When I experience a problem, I take the initiative to resolve it." The participants answered each item on a four-point rating scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 4 = "always." Higher scores indicated higher levels of proactive coping. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

Self-efficacy was assessed using the 10-item Polish version of the general self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer *et al.*, 2008). The sample item read "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." Response options for all items ranged from 1 = "not at all true" to 4 = "exactly true." Higher scores indicated higher levels of general self-efficacy. Cronbach's alpha was 0.90.

Social support was assessed with a modification of the scale developed by Ślebarska (2010), which contains questions on three kinds of support: emotional, informational and instrumental. The original scale asks participants to indicate the amount of support they receive from others, and the amount of support they need or would need. In this study, we assessed the amount of support received. Participants responded using a five-point scale that ranged from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "a great extent." Higher scores indicated larger amounts of received support. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.69.

Control variables were determined as the participants reported their age, gender, and duration of unemployment. Gender was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male, and unemployment duration was given in the number of months.

All scales revealed Cronbach's alpha equal to or higher than the cut-off values of 0.7, with the lowest level being 0.69. To manage the common method variance (CMV), we employed Harman's single factor test with an unrotated factor solution, which showed the explained variance of 30.846%, which is well below the suggested threshold of 50% (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

4. Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables. Among the demographic variables, age was positively related to the intention to change self-employment to unemployment ($r = 0.458, p = 0.001$).

Our assumption was that proactive coping (H1), self-efficacy (H2) and social support (H3) are positively related to the intention to perform self-employment in the short perspective (within 1.5 years) and in the long run (more than 1.5 years), and negatively associated to intention to self-employment exit, namely changing self-employment to employment or unemployment. As shown in Table 1, individuals with the higher level of proactive coping evince a higher willingness to remain self-employed for longer than 1.5 years ($r = 0.433, p = 0.001$). Since the relations between proactive coping and other self-employment intentions

explored in this study were not significant, our first hypothesis has been partially confirmed. We found a significant positive relationship between self-efficacy and intention to operate self-employment in a long-time perspective ($r = 0.264, p = 0.032$), along with a negative correlation between self-efficacy and intention to change self-employment to employment ($r = -0.349, p = 0.005$). These results partially confirmed our assumption about positive connections between self-efficacy and self-employment intentions. Referring to our assumption about the positive relationship between social support and intentions to self-employment, we found a negative correlation between received social support and intention to change self-employment to unemployment ($r = -0.225, p = 0.073$), which partially confirmed the third hypothesis.

The last hypothesis assumed that entrepreneurs who start self-employment report a higher intention to perform their own business in the long run (more than 1.5 years) and a lower intention to perform it in the short run (within 1.5 years). Their intentions to self-employment exit (changing self-employment to employment or unemployment) were expected to be lower. To test this assumption, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted (Table 2). Although the entrepreneurs at the beginning of the training, who launched a new business and started the training, have a higher intention for self-employment performance (more than 1.5 years) than the self-employed after the training ($d = 0.23$), the *t*-test showed no significant mean difference between the groups. Moreover, the mean difference between the intention to perform small business within 1.5 years ($d = -0.15$) and the intention to self-employment exit (change to employment; $d = -0.22$) were statistically insignificant. A significant mean difference appeared in the case of intention to self-employment exit, meaning change to unemployment ($d = -0.43$). The *t*-test ($t(62) = -2.989, p = 0.004$) revealed a significant difference in the level of intention to self-employment exit and become unemployed between entrepreneurs at the beginning of the new venture and training and those completing the training and operating a small business for 1.5 years. The intention to quit self-employment and change to unemployment was significantly higher in the sample completing the training (Figure 1), which confirmed the first hypothesis.

Table 1.
Means (M), standard deviations (SD) and correlations between study variables

Variable	Self-employment intention			
	Within 1.5 year	More than 1.5 year	Change to employment	Change to unemployment
Gender ^a	-0.116	-0.095	-0.139	-0.188
Age	-0.147	-0.073	0.019	0.443**
Time without work	-0.085	-0.073	-0.012	0.060
Proactive coping	0.205	0.433**	-0.151	-0.062
Self-efficacy	0.090	0.264*	-0.349**	-0.052
Social Support	0.053	0.165	-0.154	-0.225 ⁺
<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	3.75 (0.68)	3.68 (0.66)	1.34 (0.54)	1.20 (0.56)

Note(s): ^aGender is dummy-coded (1 = male, 0 = female); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ⁺ $p < 0.10$

Table 2.
Paired *t*-tests for self-employment intention (comparison between G1 and G2)

Self-employment intention	Mean		SD		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Significance
	G1	G2	G1	G2			
within 1.5 year	3.70	3.86	0.79	0.36	-0.83	63	0.405
more than 1.5 year	3.75	3.52	0.57	0.81	1.34	64	0.186
change to employment	1.28	1.50	0.45	0.69	-1.52	61	0.134
change to unemployment	1.07	1.50	0.25	0.89	-2.99	62	0.004**

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ⁺ $p < 0.10$

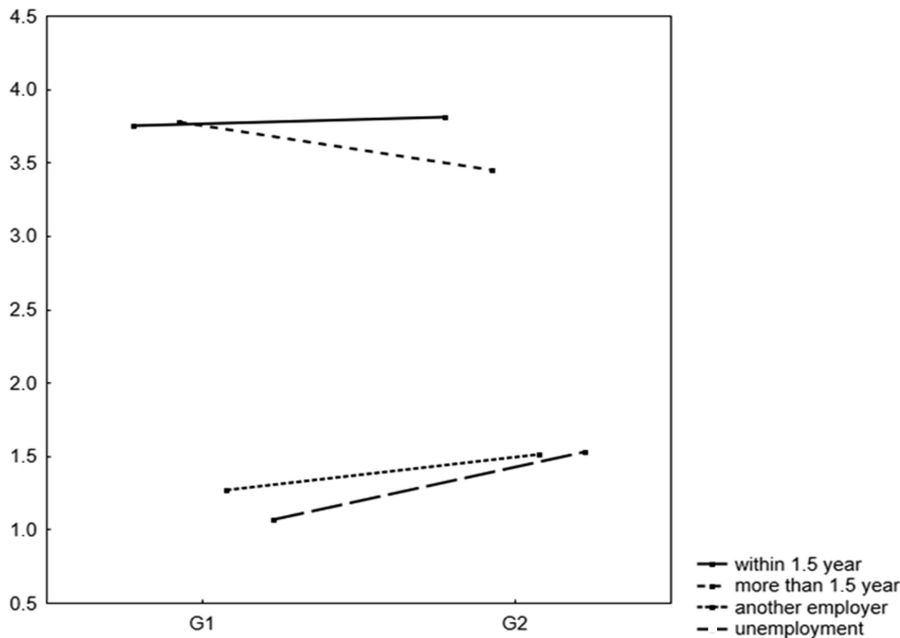


Figure 1.
Means' difference in
self-employment
intentions between
entrepreneurs
launching a new
venture (G1) and
performing self-
employment (G2)

5. Discussion

Drawing from the entrepreneurship approach (Baron, 2000; Baron & Henry, 2011), which shows personal traits are as important in creating as they are in performing self-employment, this study examined the self-employment intention in the sample of previously unemployed. The study partitioned self-employment intentions into positive, adaptive (performing a new venture in the short and long run) and maladaptive (self-employment exit: changing to employment or unemployment). The participants attended a governmental program aimed at improving entrepreneurial skills and promoting self-employment. They were obligated to run their own business for at least 1.5 years. During this time, they were trained in entrepreneurship, including planning, business launching and performing a new venture. Based on the process model of entrepreneurship (Baron & Henry, 2011) and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), we focused on self-employment intentions as a crucial predictor of future behavior, meaning operating a small business. We analyzed different intentions, namely the intention to perform self-employment within 1.5 years (during the training) or more than 1.5 years (after the training ends). This study concentrated on the psychological approach to entrepreneurship. Particularly, we analyzed the role of proactive coping in self-employment intention.

Our findings revealed that proactive coping is significantly positively related to the intention to perform self-employment. The results support our initial assumption that self-initiated, self-started and future-oriented individuals will perform self-employment better. Proactive copers scan the environment to detect potential difficulties and engage their recourse to deal with what they perceive as important and challenging (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), thus better performing their own business and receiving better distal outcomes.

Following previous research (Pihie & Bagheri, 2013; Ślebarska & Flakus, 2021; Kisubi *et al.*, 2021), we analyzed general self-efficacy as an important antecedent of self-employment intention. We found that the higher the level of general self-efficacy, the stronger the intention

to operate a small business in the long run, meaning longer than 1.5 years. Furthermore, self-efficacy was related to lower intention to self-employment exit. The more efficient entrepreneurs were less willing to change from self-employment to employment. These results are supported by the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), which foregrounds the fundamental role of self-efficacy in initiating and maintaining behaviors. Thus, a higher level of efficacy beliefs helps entrepreneurs to perform self-employment successfully.

Following our assumptions, social support is negatively related to the intention to self-employment exit. Our findings revealed a lower intention to change self-employment to unemployment among the entrepreneurs who receive stronger social support. The existing research on stress underlines the role of social support in reducing the effects of stressors (Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999). Thus, the individuals who created new ventures and feel supported while operating a new business have more chances for self-employment success.

As the last step, we compared self-employment intentions among entrepreneurs who started and finished the entrepreneurial program. Our findings revealed the intention to self-employment exit and change to unemployment to be significantly higher in the sample of participants who completed the training. On the one hand, becoming more involved in performing a new venture would lead to higher experience and the ability to cope with current obstacles. The more engaged the entrepreneurs in self-employment, the higher their motivation to operate their businesses. On the other hand, individuals who attend the activation program to promote self-employment might perform better within the training time frame. Since individuals create a new venture with a positive, even idealistic view of self-employment outcomes, their presumptions often are disconnected from reality (Major, Kozlowski, Chao, & Gardner, 1995). They might perceive a new role as challenging and significant. During entrepreneurial training, individuals are assisted in the fulfillment of all requirements accompanying self-employment. The launch phase could be compared to a honeymoon phase (Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005; Helmreich, Sawin, & Carsrud, 1986), which some studies argues is followed by the honeymoon-hangover effect (Boswell *et al.*, 2005). When the formal support program ends, the self-employed might be exposed to “reality shock.” In other words, their exposure to the labor market demands might increase frustration and disappointment, which can decrease their intention to actively perform self-employment in the long run. Even more, it can enhance their intention to self-employment exit and change to unemployment. What follows from their intention to self-employment exit, entrepreneurs expect to become unemployed rather than find employment. This tendency might derive from both previous experience of unemployment and the current difficult situation in the labor market. As mentioned above, the unemployed are mostly trained in reactive coping, which comprises a negative assessment of the situation as loss or harm, and an intention to obtain the status quo before the current situation occurred. Thus, our finding supports the assumption of the significant role of proactive coping in dealing with the present occurrence and future events related to self-employment.

5.1 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations concerning the present findings. Our study explored the role of proactive coping in the intention to operate self-employment or self-employment exit among previously unemployed entrepreneurs who attended the self-employment training. Considering the results of previous studies (Frese & Gielnik, 2014) that showed trends for obtaining self-employment success among entrepreneurs with higher personal initiative, we did not control for self-employment’s distal outcomes. Although our findings provide knowledge on the importance of proactive coping in the entrepreneurial process (self-employment intentions), they could be extended to include distal outcomes, such as maintaining the created venture. Second, data were obtained from a relatively small sample of

participants. Thus, the study's generalizability may be limited. Nevertheless, the sample provided sufficient statistical power to test our assumptions, and we reached the whole group involved in the training. Moreover, we used a cross-sectional design. The participants were partitioned into two groups, which allowed for observing the differences in self-employment intentions at the launch and postlaunch stage of the new ventures. Finally, we used self-report measures which are often the only possible way to examine psychological constructs, such as self-efficacy or intention in a specific context (Lucas, 2018). All measures had well-assessed psychometric properties (reliability and validity) and were previously used in other research settings. Nevertheless, future research would gain from a longitudinal design to assess behavioral indicators in the analyzed factors.

5.2 Implications for research and practice

As discussed above, our study described the role of proactive coping in self-employment intention. Following the entrepreneurship research and TPB, we found a positive relationship between this kind of coping and the intention to further develop own business that have several practical implications.

Our study foregrounded the importance of proactivity during the starting and operating phases of a new venture. Proactive coping is particularly important to unemployed workers who move into self-employment because they need to think in advance about future perspectives and consequences of their activity. Most programs aimed at the unemployed train them to respond and adapt to current circumstances. However, opportunity recognition, resources accumulation and coping in advance with anticipated obstacles seem crucial to self-employment success. Following the constant change in the labor market, we should consider what skills could be beneficial and trainable in the entrepreneurship context. Our findings indicate that proactive coping can be particularly appropriate for self-employed at any stage of the entrepreneurial process, because it maintains one's intention to perform own business. Thus, our findings support the introduction of proactive coping training for entrepreneurs.

Public policies aimed at encouraging unemployed individuals to become entrepreneurs require improvement concerning motivation and effectiveness. Successful entrepreneurship needs to attract individuals interested in creating and developing their own businesses in the long term. Governmental or the European Union programs focused on supporting self-employment among the unemployed should monitor their willingness to innovate, thus assuring fair investments and business growth. This kind of support is crucial in transforming the European Union's economies, especially when it comes to the Just Transition Fund. Dynamization of development and improvement of productivity should be implemented through investment incentives to start business activities (Drobniak *et al.*, 2020). On the one hand, they should be addressed to various investors, but on the other hand, also to people who will lose their jobs due to the negative consequences of changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic or changes in the European Union climate policy. Organizational support in establishing own business is often one of the elements of outplacement services. Outplacement is the process by which a person whose employment is terminated receives help aimed at finding a further career path (Lee, 1992). Policymakers' activities should mostly seek professional reintegration of the dismissed workers. Unfortunately, in the face of such profound socioeconomic changes, it is usually impossible for all employees to secure jobs. Therefore, one of the possibilities for such people is to start their own businesses. Outplacement services also aid people who choose to start their businesses. It may be financial aid in the form of grants or loans granted on preferential terms and advisory services consisting of consultations on tax and insurance exemptions for people who establish a business (Bortnowska & Stankiewicz, 2015). As noted, self-employment intention is related to individual resources, making self-efficacy and social support crucial for business growth. The self-employed can strengthen their

positive expectations about performing self-employment in the long run through training in self-efficacy beliefs.

To conclude, our study provided detailed knowledge on specific relations in the tested self-employment intentions, which can be fruitful starting points for entrepreneurial programs, particularly at their preliminary stages: participant recruitment and selection. Following the available statistics (WUP, 2021, 2022), the need remains to improve the content of such procedures. However, what criteria are worthy of considering in selecting the program's participants? We underline the self-employment intention that goes beyond the time of obligatory performing a new venture regulated by program rules. Second, what skill might be particularly useful and trainable in self-employment? This article has proposed proactive coping, as our findings indicated that proactive coping increases constructive entrepreneurial intentions.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the studies on entrepreneurship in a few ways. First, we showed that personal characteristics – particularly proactive coping – relate positively to adaptive self-employment intention. An essential aspect of such investigations was the social context: individual and global, e.g. local labor market and the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, the findings showed that self-employment intentions might differ in time. By comparing the group of entrepreneurs being at the launch and post-launch stage of a new venture, we observe diversity, especially in the intention to self-employment exit. Third, the knowledge about the possible change in self-employment intentions over time and its relation to proactive coping indicated the need for proactive coping training for entrepreneurs.

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