

Entrepreneurship as a Process of Integration

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Central Thesis

The study of entrepreneurship as an integrative mechanism for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations is gaining increased momentum. In a comprehensive undertaking, Wood, Davidson, and Fielden (2012) have recently adduced examinations of several under-researched minority groups¹ in entrepreneurship, highlighting through various case studies, the psychological, social and humanistic benefits derived from entrepreneurial activities, while also contending that some of the risks associated with starting a business minimally compare to the possibilities of success (p. 149). Casting a light on an especially vulnerable group of entrepreneurs who often operate in extreme circumstances, the study of refugees and asylum seekers² who start a business is equally coming to the fore (Heilbrunn, Freiling, & Harima, 2018).

Labelled the “refugee crisis” of 2014/2015 (Parater, 2015; Lucassen, 2017), mass migration into Western nations from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has caused concern, pressure and much alarm to recipient social and economic systems. The UNHCR (2018) reported 17 million refugees³ on the move in 2000, which has nearly quadrupled in 2016. And, despite the global increase in voluntary mobility that has fomented multiculturalism, refugees still remain among the most marginalized of our societies, exposed to poverty and

¹ In appreciating degree of disadvantage (their definition): youth, seniors, women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB), disabled and indigenous populations – with a special mention of, but unexamined, groups of ex-offenders and war veterans.

² As articulated in Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 1951), a refugee is a person who faces legitimate fear of persecution for reasons of “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”, who then flees from a home state that is unable or unwilling to guarantee safety and protection. Prior to being recognized as (by obtaining the legal and protective status of) a “refugee”, people who enter host nations are identified as asylum seekers, who must undergo a process – one which might be interminable – of verification. As this paper does not focus on the legal status of refugees who have fled, both asylum seekers and refugees will be considered as a single refugee segment of the population.

³ This includes internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum seekers, refugees, returnees (including IDPs and refugees), stateless persons and others of concern who are beneficiaries of UNHCR aid and services.

discrimination, as Bloch (2008, 2014), among others, illustrates for the UK. Host countries are engendering “brain waste” (Hugo, 2014) in relation to refugees and labour markets, uninformed and ill-equipped to make good of the potential capital and social gains of refugee-led business ownership as well. In Australia for instance, refugees “show greater propensity to form their own business than other migrants” (ibid., p. 31), also reflected in Germany by Sternberg, von Bloh and Brixy (2016). In turn, this has given rise to new and tenacious consideration as to the successful management strategies host-nations can adopt for refugee intake and integration processes, taking into account the extraordinarily varied contextual realities in which refugees journey into, out of and through – necessitating adaptable measures.

A constant that emerges, irrespective of the peculiarities of a refugee’s situatedness, degree of cultural or social impoverishment, resource restriction or loss, human capital devaluation, legal status ambiguity, etc., is the inventive activity of entrepreneuring (Steyaert, 2007; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009). In refugee camps (e.g. Betts, Cuellar & Surendra, 2016; Alloush et al., 2017; Omata, 2017), also confronted by intentional institutional voids (Heilbrunn, 2019), the benefits of entrepreneurship that are achieved through the strategic application of unique capabilities and resource re-/configurations (e.g. social capital), evidences that refugees can carve out a favourable livelihood, a reassembled identity and a strong social stature for themselves (Bizri, 2017; Sandberg, Immonen & Kok, 2018), enhanced when supported by social and governmental programmes (Fong et al., 2007; Sepulveda, Syrett, & Lyon, 2011; Abdel Jabbar & Ibrahim Zaza, 2016; van Kooy, 2016). Thus, policy attention towards instruments and structures that can wield the benefits of business start-up and ownership has led to new action plans, such as the “inclusive entrepreneurship” approach (OECD, 2019), reverberating what research in the field of refugee entrepreneurship studies cites: that “both the integration of refugees in society can be

aided and entrepreneurship in general can be boosted” (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, p. 509). Yet, academic studies on entrepreneuring as a process of integration are lacking (Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019), denoting a critical knowledge gap as well as a research opportunity that can inform policy in aspirations towards social and economic prosperity.

This study thus aims to empirically understand and also further conceptualise on the notions of “entrepreneuring” (Steyaert, 2007; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009) and integration (Ager & Strang, 2008) by building on a qualitative multi-case study of refugee entrepreneurs who engage in business start-up activities and entrepreneurship in a central European host country. Emphasis is placed on the processes, lived experiences and sensemaking derived from participants’ interactions and relational journeys.

Integration

Integration has come to the forefront of national priorities, particularly in response to the recent mass waves of refugee migration. Often interchanged with the term ‘inclusion’, ‘integration’ has garnered theoretical attention, given its abstraction when de-coupled from the neo-liberal archetype of economic integration (i.e. market participation through employment). Notwithstanding, the European Union prioritises employment above a variety of integrating objectives, related to language, education, institutional or social connectiveness, through its “*11 Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy*” (Council of the European Union, 2004). On an supranational level, the OECD’s (2019) “inclusive entrepreneurship” agenda casts a light on the importance of promoting and supporting entrepreneurial activities for the “missing entrepreneurs” (OECD/European Union, 2017) as the main gateway towards social inclusion: “The objective is to move more people into work via self-employment to allow people an opportunity to participate economically and socially, and to generate income for themselves” (p. 15). Emphasis on the tangible object of employment aside, this ideal befits an inquiry into the process of

entrepreneurship – as “moving people [...] into [...] self-employment” (ibid.) begets a heightened sensitivity to an in-betweenness and active changes from within a process that in turn, qualifies the character and value of economic and social integration. Notably, in Berry’s (1997) bi-dimensional acculturation model, integration occurs when one can maintain of one’s own identity while interacting with society and a ‘new’ dominant culture⁴. Expounding on this in relation to the integration of refugees is a conceptual framework that Ager and Strang (2008) developed in their empirical study of refugees in the UK, identifying ten “domains of integration” along a categorisation of “markers and means”, “social connections”, “facilitators” and a “foundation [of] citizenship and rights”. As a “middle-range theory” (ibid., p. 167), the framework provides a useful normative perspective on how this study can first approach sensemaking in a refugee’s processes of integration.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009) as a verb, rather than a noun, puts a secondary focus on entrepreneurs as protagonists and rather focuses on what they actually do – the dynamics of the entrepreneurial process, relations negotiated throughout, enactments and construed meaning. This inescapably shifts our perception from entrepreneurship as an objective construct towards more socially constructed phenomenon – that is *happening* – wielding business ownership as a vehicle through which to realise tantamount, and more complex features of ‘becoming’ an entrepreneur. Indeed, entrepreneurship has been shown to alleviate poverty (Bruton, Ketchen & Ireland, 2013), discrimination, unemployment and other forms of social and economic deprivation (Bates, 1997), while strengthening the empowerment, emancipation (Rindova, Barry & Ketchen,

⁴ Assimilation occurs when one becomes entirely submerged into a dominant culture; separation ensues when one’s individual identity is preserved yet relations with society do not occur; and, marginalisation takes place when one’s identity is lost while one also does not become a part of society. Despite clear distinctions between his categorisations Berry’s (1997) constructs are not to be understood as static or entirely discreet.

2009) and inclusion of minority groups (Alvord, Brown & Letts, 2004). Key in such studies is the *active* nature of the one starting a business – signalling some developmental, if not evolutionary, essence to one *becoming* an entrepreneur, and thus, forging inclusion and integration along the way.

Anderson and Ronteau (2017) have provided a useful analytical framework, inspired by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), that makes it possible to deeply examine facilitators and constraints that may otherwise remain invisible in entrepreneurial processes and spaces, enabling a critical appreciation of the ways in which entrepreneurship is understood. This entails the “what” (empirical) in the everyday practices of entrepreneuring, the “how” (theoretical) that focuses on the explicative features of everyday practices and the “why” (philosophical) of practices that makes it possible to discern the social worlds being brought into existence through entrepreneuring.

Methodology

This current research draws upon an ongoing abductive⁵ (Blundel, 2007, p. 57) study, framed as a case study (Yin, 2003) in a central European country. The qualitative data employed encompasses thematic (Merriam, 2009) semi-structured interviews with (40) nascent⁶ entrepreneurs who have a refugee profile, four of which are being followed and re-interviewed throughout a 16-24-month period (two females and two males). Participants are asked about personal life and entrepreneurial experiences in their new host country of residence and life history interviews (Mandelbaum, 1982) take into account their pre-flight biographies, including personal, educational and professional experiences. Participant-

⁵ Inspired by Danermark et al. (2002, 88-95), Blundel (2007, p. 57 and 70) denotes this research process as one that is non-linear, where the researcher interprets and redescribes various components, structures and relationships, making use of sometimes contrasting theoretical frameworks, with the objective of uncovering new insights and generating new theory.

⁶ The study draws upon Davidsson and Honig's (2003) conceptualisation of nascent entrepreneurship, which they built upon Carter, Gartner and Reynolds' (1996) framework: entrepreneurs who are “trying to start a new independent firm”, having initiated “at least one gestation activity for a current, independent start-up by the time of the interview” (pp. 312-313).

observations at refugee entrepreneurship meetups that are organised by an NGO in the field are ongoing (16 months thus far, by-monthly on average) as well as participant-observations at business events run by the participants of the study. Interviews with institutional actors and key figures nominated by the nascent entrepreneurs as “important” to their business start-up processes are also ongoing. A cross-case analysis will inform a larger “extreme case [...] in rich depth” (Eisenhardt, Graebner & Sonenshein, 2006, p. 1118) so as to deeply reconsider the main concepts of the thesis. Consent to participate in the study has been obtained by all participants, on the commitment of anonymity.

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