

# **ENTREPRENEURSHIP, EMANCIPATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AUTONOMY UNDER EXTREME CONSTRAINTS**

Research Area: Strategy/ Entrepreneurship/International Business

Key Words: Emancipation, Autonomy, Action-Spaces

## **Theoretical Background**

For many individuals entrepreneurship plays a central role in not just their occupation but also their lived reality within contexts of constraint (Joseph and Selvaraj, 2010; Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Chandra, 2017). Research has highlighted this relationship in various detrimental contexts including extreme resource scarcity (Hota, Mitra and Qureshi, 2019), patriarchal societies and institutional voids (Mair and Marti, 2009; Heilbrunn, 2019). Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009) called attention to such restricted groups who create positive change via entrepreneurial pursuits, employing the term ‘emancipatory entrepreneuring’ (EE), in reference to the “efforts to bring about new economic, social, institutional, and cultural environments through the actions of an individual or group of individuals” (p.477). Here focus is placed upon the acts individuals carry out and the processes they go through in seeking to transition from negative situations.

Although emancipatory process research is growing, very little is known about the processes leading to emancipation and the interaction between individuals and the restrictive context. This is problematic in two ways. First, literature tends to over-emphasize the acts that individuals carry out, neglecting the role of constraints, which are often viewed in a static sense (Goss et al., 2011) producing reductive approaches that fail to provide analysis across multi-levels (Williams et al., 2020). Second, it assumes that emancipation and entrepreneuring work in conjunction, overlooking what enables emancipatory processes. In Rindova et al.’s view, EE begins with seeking autonomy, where entrepreneurs attempt to overcome the constraints that

limit their independence. Yet, in certain contexts, e.g., slavery, imprisonment, or tyranny, the removal of limits to independence seems impossible to achieve, unless the individual escapes from it. We wonder how a process can even initiate if an essential pre-condition is unachievable.

To tackle these issues, this paper sets out to explore the circumstances and actions preceding emancipatory entrepreneurship and the relationship between constraints and entrepreneurial individuals in the construction of autonomy.

## **Methodology**

We focus on the UK prison system as it provides a uniquely restrictive context in that material restriction appears fixed, severe, and omnipresent, studying the prison journey of eleven individuals, who over time became known for “being entrepreneurial”, establishing business-like initiatives from within prison. Longitudinal life narrative interviews (Leung, 2010; Kevill et al., 2015) were combined with timelining, a form of graphic elicitation, commencing shortly after inmates were released from prison, to capture experiences which began to produce an emancipatory outcome. Reconstructing experiences, focus was placed on circumstances, actions and events – both positive and negative – identified by them as central to their emancipatory journey. Key events were coded and analysed using process-tracing methods (Muñoz, Cacciotti and Cohen, 2018; Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte, 2019) to discover a unique process preceding entrepreneurial actions and the realization of emancipatory outcomes.

## **Main Findings**

While most inmates return to deviant behaviour after the initial trauma of incarceration and loss of autonomy (Stevens, 2012; Wooldredge, 2020), our participants appear to experience something different. The commencement of incarceration is experienced as a ‘temporal

landmark' which begins a perception of time freezing, as life outside prison continues. With the perception of time changing, they engage in actions to 'reset themselves' (Dai, 2018) and move away from deviant behaviour. Those actions are oriented to helping others and emerge as our participants separate themselves from the context, develop a sense of agency and regain control. Helping others in a space of constraint is seen as beneficial as it is an inconspicuous activity which may increase the chances of early release. This marks the delineation of an initial action space that bounds 'helping actions'. To allow for 'doing more for others' in a context where material restrictions are fixed, severe, and omnipresent, they begin to expand the action space exploring the fractures and cracks of the prison environment, e.g taking on peer mentoring duties, or providing drug and alcohol support services. In doing so, a sense of purpose begins to take shape; where it appears that more can be done, deepening the perception of control. As this process unfolds, three elements begin to operate in conjunction - purpose, space and helping actions – enabling the construction of autonomy, laying a fertile ground for engagement with entrepreneurial activities, as 'helping actions' transition to business-like initiatives. Indeed, entrepreneurial actions become noticeable only after the action space is expanded. Our eleven participants actively work constraints, in comparison to those who return to deviant behavior where constraints seem to prevail. Combining our findings with research on temporal self-appraisal, resets (Dai, Milkman and Riis, 2014; Dai, 2018) and opportunity spaces (Jing and Benner, 2016), we theorize this EE preparatory process as the construction of autonomy under extreme constraints.

### **Potential contribution**

This study makes three contributions. First, we extend EE theory by revealing and theorizing the process of construction of autonomy as an early enabler of emancipation. Findings show that entrepreneurship and emancipation do not necessarily work in conjunction and that seeking autonomy can initiate in extremely restrictive contexts by working the context and expanding

the action-opportunity space, before entrepreneurial actions can materialize. We argue that by doing so, would-be entrepreneurs develop a dynamic relationship with constraints, helping them to progress from a perception of restriction to one of opportunity. We also contribute to a broader understanding of emancipation in disadvantaged settings, where overcoming constraints tends to be conceptualized at the level of resources. Our research brings to light the role of action spaces. We reveal that the construction of spaces – material and perceived - where people can act, are as relevant as the entrepreneurial actions generally prescribed to deal with resource constraints. Our findings also have significant practical implications for the rehabilitation of offenders, providing evidence for ‘goal orientated’ models of rehabilitation such as the Good Life Model (Fortune, 2018) which promotes life goal aspirations as a device for avoiding reoffending. We see clear evidence of how entrepreneuring fosters a strong sense of purpose beyond the prison context, aiding in reducing reoffending.