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Disability entrepreneurship research: review and critical reflection through the lens of individual-opportunity nexus

by

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Disability entrepreneurship research: review and critical reflection through the lens of individual-opportunity nexus

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Abstract

Given the paucity and the fragmented nature of the extant literature on disability entrepreneurship, this literature review juxtaposes the current body of knowledge to the individual-opportunity nexus perspective on entrepreneurship. Six thematic findings emerge from the review. Together, they suggest that while the term disability is understood in relation to structural hindrances and that barriers on multiple levels – societal, market, and personal – influence the availability of opportunities to entrepreneurs with disability (EWDs), current understanding of how these challenges could be overcome is mostly related to adaptive mechanisms at the individual level. The use of individual-opportunity nexus as the point of departure reveals some limitations, as we argue that the deterministic, variance-theoretic approach may be too restrictive if entrepreneurship is intended as a development policy. The same concern will likely apply to other areas of entrepreneurship involving disadvantaged people. Some future research avenues that contribute to both theory and practice are suggested.

Key words – Disability, Entrepreneurship, Systematic literature review, Individual-Opportunities nexus, Competences, Public policy

Introduction

It has long been noted that disabled people (referred to in this paper as persons with disabilities – PWDs¹, henceforth) are more likely to be self-employed than the general population (Pagán 2009) because employment discrimination is presumed to be rife in the labour market (Fairlie 2005; Renko et al. 2016). Entrepreneurship has therefore given hope for PWDs to thrive from their underprivileged positions (Alvord et al. 2004) as a means to alleviate poverty (Barnes and Sheldon 2010) or a device for social inclusion (De Clercq and Honig 2011). Firms founded by entrepreneurs with disabilities (EWDs henceforth) can make significant contributions to the economy (Renko et al. 2016) and generate jobs for other PWDs as they grow (Anderson and Galloway 2012), creating a virtuous cycle for those with similar challenges.

Our rationale behind this literature review encompasses academic, practice, and policy aspects. It is common that entrepreneurship is subject to high hope as a policy tool to create economic growth and reduce poverty for those whom the job market has failed (Acs and Szerb 2007). However, when it comes to disadvantaged groups such as female entrepreneurs (Henry et al. 2015), ethnic minorities (Bates et al. 2007), and immigrants (Ram et al. 2017), our current understanding of such phenomena leaves much to be desired. The situation is arguably worse in disability entrepreneurship, which is much more nascent than in the aforementioned areas. It is not yet well understood, fragmented, descriptive and poorly represented in top-tier journals (Dwertmann 2016), as recently demonstrated in a review by Mota *et al.* (2020). Directly borrowing from ‘mainstream’ entrepreneurship is likely to be problematic and more challenging for unfamiliar contexts such as emerging economies (Foo et al. 2020).

To begin with, the power imbalance is inherent in entrepreneurship as an organisational field, though it is insufficient for disabled entrepreneurs to emulate conventional entrepreneurs (De Clercq and Honig 2011), who are often characterised by attributes such as heroism (Johnsen and Sørensen 2017). Moreover, within the general population, relying on entrepreneurship as a policy tool for economic growth rarely works (Shane 2009) and instead compounds the challenge. We agree with the assertion that a systematic investigation is warranted to achieve a holistic understanding of the research in disability entrepreneurship (cf. Pagán 2009).

Therefore, we reviewed 52 articles related to disability and entrepreneurship published in academic journals up until 2020. The review framework is based on the individual-opportunity (IO) nexus of entrepreneurship (Shane 2003; Shane and Venkataraman 2000), owing to its distinct impact on general entrepreneurship research. Taking this model as the point of departure, we explore and critically reflect on its implications for disability entrepreneurship. Based on the selected papers reviewed, structural barriers to entrepreneurship are generally assumed and built into how the phenomenon of interest is defined. In contrast, the possible adjustments made to overcome said barriers are mainly examined and articulated at the individual level, similar to traditional entrepreneurship research. To this end, we suggest that the assumptions underpinning the IO nexus would be problematic where entrepreneurs with disability (EWDs) or disadvantaged groups of entrepreneurs are concerned. Besides, many articles cover the role of entrepreneurship in empowerment, the

¹ It is important to note that the terminology – person with disability vs. disabled person – remains a contentious issue as each term is associated with a certain political/philosophical orientation (Bickenbach et al. 1999). In this paper, the abbreviation PWDs is used merely for brevity.

importance of social support, and other social values that are not always quantifiable in economic terms. Many of these points, however, are implications from findings rather than the focus. We suggest that entrepreneurship's non-economic and social values warrant a more conscious attention, as they may promote more productive entrepreneurial outcomes despite a potentially slower economic pace (Hall et al. 2012; Korsgaard and Anderson 2011).

In the light of our reflection, we argue that there are two critical concerns regarding the approach to future research: the role of context in which EWDs are embedded, and the influences of, and between, different levels of analysis. At this early stage of the field, there are many future research avenues, three of which are highlighted based on our review: the process of opportunity recognition by PWDs, competence characteristics and development, and non-economic value of entrepreneurship.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the protocol used for literature search and selection, as well as the overview of the articles selected for review. Next, we introduce the review framework based on the IO nexus, and six thematic findings from the extant literature. We then discuss the critical points that need to be considered in disability entrepreneurship research, and some suggestions for future research agenda.

Review approach: Literature search, selection, and analysis

The process of search and selection for our review shares much in common with the systematic literature review (SLR) outlined by Tranfield et al. (2003). SLR involves a search and selection protocol that is precise and replicable (hence the term 'systematic'). Therefore, SLR gives a thorough overview of the field and help researchers identify the knowledge gap with greater confidence, which can be beneficial in both established and less mature fields (Kraus et al., 2020). In our case, we are confronted with a nascent, emerging field of disability entrepreneurship. The main benefit of using a systematic search and selection protocol is in the thorough literature coverage due to a paucity of relevant content in the top-tier management journals. The caveat, however, is in the interpretation of the resulting pool of literature to be reviewed. For example, as the number of publications has only spiked in recent years due to two special issues concentrated around two research projects, the 'statistics' should not be taken at face value. Likewise, the lack of certain perspectives represented should not be noted as a mere deficiency, but with the awareness of the relatively early stage of development. Therefore, our analysis of the literature has much less to do with evaluating how complete the body of knowledge is, but more to do with some – out of potentially many – questions that can be asked to encourage further research.

The review is limited to published, peer-reviewed academic articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases from all the years available on the record. To aim for extensive coverage, the keywords only specify entrepreneurship and disability. Since we are interested in the characteristics of entrepreneurship that are related to value creation from innovative offerings, and other theoretical underpinnings such as traits and competences specific to this concept, we do not include other terms such as self-employment, which represent a distinct phenomenon. In the same vein, the term impairment that has often been used interchangeably with a disability, are conceptually distinct (Bickenbach et al. 1999; Oliver 1990). Disability, which points to the mismatch between one's condition and his/her environment, is more relevant to the purpose. In addition to these key considerations, we limit the

language of the papers to English, and only to business, sociology, and psychology, which have influences on entrepreneurship research (Duane Ireland and Webb 2007).

We started with Scopus as the primary database, as it contains most of the major journals relevant to entrepreneurship. From 220 articles returned², rounds of selection starting from article titles, abstracts, and full text, were performed independently by both authors for relevance and quality, resulting in 40 journal articles for review. WoS returned 114 results³. After the same process of selection, 12 additional articles from two journals were not indexed by Scopus. Consequently, the total number of relevant papers increased to 52.

Descriptive profile of selected papers

a) Methods: More than half of the selected articles (n = 26) employ qualitative methods, mainly using interviews. The use of focus groups can be found in a small number of papers by the same team of researchers (Parker Harris et al. 2013; Parker Harris et al. 2014b), and participatory action research by a different team (Lorenzo et al. 2007; Van Niekerk et al. 2006). The number of interviewees tends to be on a smaller size, i.e. lower than 30 (Caldwell et al. 2019; Csillag et al. 2019; Hsieh et al. 2019), reflecting the possible difficulty of access to suitable participants. Another 20 studies use quantitative surveys, and some contain a mix of PWDs/EWDs with non-disabled counterparts for comparison (Beisland et al., 2016; Mohammed and Jamil 2015). Lastly, we have come across five papers that are based on a literature review, though there is only one SLR which is also the most recent (Mota et al. 2020).

b) Year of publication: As shown in Figure 1, the count of articles published shows a dramatic spike in 2019, though much of the increase is perhaps artificial. Of the 25 articles published in 2019, nineteen came from two special issues in the *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, and *Suma de Negocios*, authored by the same set of researchers, leaving only six articles from other journals. Nonetheless, six is already a small growth, as 2016-2018 saw three to four articles published each year.

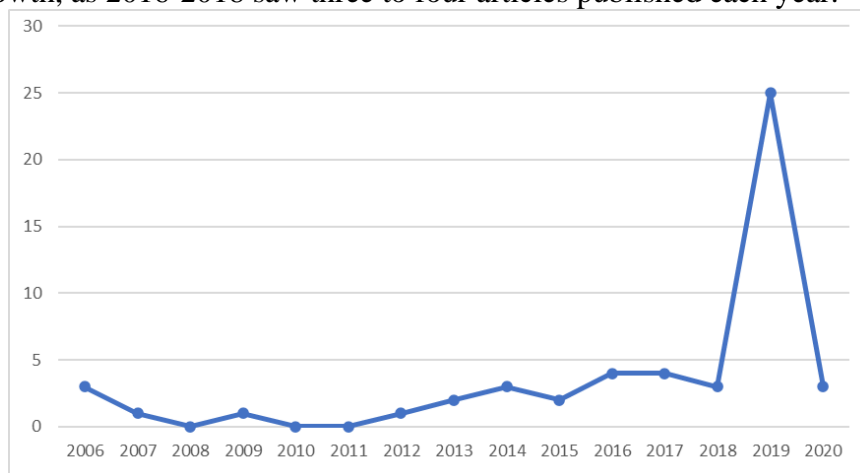


Figure 1 Distribution of publications by year (2006-2020)

² Syntax: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (entrepreneu* AND disab*) AND LANGUAGE ("English") AND SUBJAREA (busi OR soci OR psyc)

³ Syntax: (TI=(disab* AND entrepren*) OR AB=(disab* AND entrepren*)) AND LANGUAGE: (English) AND DOCUMENT TYPES: (Article)

c) *Publication outlets*: The journals in which the selected articles appear are highly dispersed. Not counting the two aforementioned special issues, only four journals carry more than one publication directly related to disability entrepreneurship – *Disability & Society* (n=3), *Journal of Enterprising Communities* (n=3), *Disability and Rehabilitation* (n=2), and *International Small Business Journal* (n=2). In terms of the disciplinary composition, it is roughly equal between entrepreneurship/small business and disability studies. Another observation is perhaps related to the early stage of the field, as only *Information, Communication & Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* are assigned impact factors above 3.00. Using SLR process helps remove the tendency to consult only established and/or familiar sources.

Review framework

Our approach for this review is to juxtapose the notion of individual-opportunity (IO) nexus (Shane 2003; Shane and Venkataraman 2000) to the relevant elements from the current body of knowledge. Shane and Venkataraman (2000) have made a remarkable impact. It was the most cited entrepreneurship article in the 00s (Davidsson 2015) and received the 2010 *Academy of Management Review* Decade Award (Shane 2012). The main assumption is that an opportunity is found rather than made, though not everyone has the same ability to recognise and exploit the opportunities that exist (Shane and Venkataraman 2000). Individual characteristics make one better equipped than others, including previous experience, social network, cognitive abilities, economic circumstances and psychological factors, such as heroic imagination and aggression (Shane 2003). The population is heterogenous and individuals are differently endowed with this set of qualities, explaining why only some people are entrepreneurs. This heterogeneity is usually assumed in other entrepreneurship theories (Alvarez and Busenitz 2001; Kuechle 2011).

We must note, though, that we aim to ‘fit’ the literature into this perspective. Quite a contrast, our reading of the IO nexus has raised some questions over its applicability to the experience of disabled entrepreneurs. Disability has usually been assigned a negative ontology compared to the ‘*normal*’ (Hughes 2007). The notion of a desirable set of qualities within an individual are shaped on how opportunities are perceived, and how business ideas are processed. Our review framework does not affirm nor dispute the validity of the IO nexus but rather, given its influence, explores the implications it may have when adopted as a perspective in disability entrepreneurship.

The findings contain five interrelated components emerging from the literature. First is how disability is defined, much of which has to do with the mismatch between the environment and the individual’s condition, often resulting in structural barriers in various dimensions. Subsequently, the next three elements deal with how said barriers might be overcome, mainly by competence development, e.g., training and education and support network. Based on these measures, we have identified the non-economic value of entrepreneurship which is often mentioned in the articles reviewed, though rarely as a research focus.

Since our purpose is to encourage further research by applying a mainstream and influential perspective to a nascent field of disability entrepreneurship (see Kraus et al. 2020 for benefits of SLR in a nascent field), we forego quantifying discrete elements such as word associations or frequency in the analysis. Our work here

should complement a recent systematic review by Mota et al. (2020) who have taken a more comprehensive approach to describe the overall literature domain.

Thematic findings

Research context overview

It is sometimes implied that the uptake of entrepreneurship itself is a sign of oppression, especially for people who are also marginalised in other ways, such as female, foreign-born, or ethnic minority PWDs (Larsson 2006; Williams and Patterson 2019). Larsson (2006, p. 163) refers to this phenomenon as ‘simultaneous repression’. There is a need for further consideration of political-economic and socio-cultural factors to understand better the potential of a given intervention to benefit PWDs (Parker Harris, et al. 2014b). Most studies included in this review make a good effort to specify the geographical context, which could be helpful when interpreting the results. It can provide a clue to what contextual factors are at play.

Cases are dealt with in detail in some of the studies, such as the Chicago-based studies (Caldwell et al. 2019; Parker Harris et al. 2013; Renko et al. 2016), or specific initiatives studied by Anderson and Galloway (2012), Van Niekerk et al. (2006), and Balcazar et al. (2014). Some studies touch on location-specific factors, such as benefit trap or the worry over possible loss of benefits as a deterrent to entrepreneurship for PWDs in Western economies (Boellstorff 2018; Korpysa 2009; Reddington and Fitzsimons 2013). Some deal with cultural factors more implicitly such as Saxena and Pandya (2018) who make some interesting points on personality development and family support regarding India. Considering a world that has become increasingly digital, Boellstorff (2018) has done a notable study focusing on EWDs experiences in a virtual community, with data gathered from both physical and virtual worlds. More often, however, it is not explicit how contextual factors have influenced the study design or the results gathered, despite a good amount of descriptive detail.

Most studies mention the type(s) of disability covered. A few only deal with one type of disability such as hearing impairment (Jasniak et al. 2018), visual impairment (Ng and Arndt 2019), and intellectual disabilities (Caldwell et al. 2019). Most studies feature more than one type (Parker Harris, et al. 2014b; Saxena and Pandya 2018; Sefotho 2015) but some forego specifying altogether (Mohammed and Jamil 2015).

Disability definitions

Disability is defined in some of the papers, though it is implied rather than specified in most of them. It may be viewed as ‘some kind of impairment’ itself, which ‘results in a sustained restriction in daily activities’ (Mohammed and Jamil 2015, p. 72). As a result of impairment, either temporary or permanent, disability is viewed as a ‘disadvantage that stems from a lack of fit between a body and its social environment’ (Goering 2015, p. 134 emphasis added). Some (e.g., Csillag et al. 2019, p. 42) adopt a definition from World Health Organization (WHO 2011, p. 4) which treats disability as an umbrella definition covering ‘impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions’.

How the term disability is defined is significant. Though physical limitations may come first to mind, actively recognising social disadvantages in addition to medical impairment ‘shifts blame away from the individual and instead examines societal responses to those with disabilities focusing on disadvantages that such

people experience due to social and environmental barriers' (Renko et al. 2016, p. 556). Whereas the medical model implies that there is a standard or 'normal' way to an individual's conduct, it is progress to begin tackling social marginalisation of 'people living with impairment whose experiences are contextually (negatively) mediated by social, material or cultural influences' (Williams and Patterson 2019, p. 1707).

Where the IO nexus is concerned, the structural disadvantages may mean that disabled people experience the 'opportunities' differently. A long-standing critique from researchers within entrepreneurship research is that entrepreneurs are too often assumed special and studies skewed by success stories, obscuring how the opportunity comes to be discovered and exploited (Anderson et al. 2009; Johnsen and Sørensen 2017). Losing sight of the social context and lived experiences of disabled people, and female and those of ethnic minorities (Zahra et al. 2014), could be a costly mistake that amplifies the current shortcomings in entrepreneurship research.

Thematic finding 1: According to the extant literature, the term disability is related to structural hindrance for EWDs

Challenge-based model and adaptive mechanisms

Social and economic disadvantages faced by entrepreneurs with disability (EWDs) are generally recognised in the articles reviewed. PWDs are more likely to be engaged in entrepreneurial activities than the general population but less likely to emerge from a viable venture (Renko et al. 2016).

Some studies in the entrepreneurship area link directly to the notion of challenge-based entrepreneurship by 'underdog' entrepreneurs (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017), which include Hsieh et al. (2019), Ng and Arndt (2019), and Saxena and Pandya (2018). The challenge-based model focuses on four different stages: type of challenges, condition and experience, adaptive requirement, and outcomes. It explores the role of adverse personal circumstances in getting people to become effective entrepreneurs.

To overcome the challenges, Hsieh et al. (2019) propose a challenges-adaptive mechanisms-results (CARE) model for EWDs, such as supportive networks, access to resources, positive individual motivation and personal qualities. Through effective adaptive mechanisms, disabled entrepreneurs can enhance their effectiveness and the capacity to succeed. Saxena and Pandya (2018) found no difference in the traits between EWDs and non-disabled entrepreneurs, only that EWDs are more resilient, persistent and less hesitant to ask for help. Ng and Arndt (2019) however discuss a unique adaptive mechanism more specific to EWDs. They find that visually impaired entrepreneurs can capitalise on narrow public perceptions of blindness (and disability in general). Impairment therefore has been used as a distinctive attribute to exploit public perceptions.

In line with the thematic finding 1, the use of the challenge-based model assumes that PWDs are on an uneven playing field with various types of challenges – economic, socio-cultural, cognitive, and physical and emotional. While the challenges are multi-level and comprehensive, they translate mostly to individual EWD's circumstances which determine the scope of adaptive requirements.

Thematic finding 2: According to the extant literature, overcoming multi-level challenges for EWDs is mainly related to adaptive mechanisms at an individual level

Challenge-based perspective is not new to other researchers who have not specifically referred to the underdog model. In their extensive studies of EWDs in the Chicago area, Parker Harris et al. (2013) identify three areas of barriers: 1) education, training and information, 2) finance, funding and asset development, 3) networking and supporters, which align with Hsieh et al.'s (2019) CARE adaptive mechanisms, save for motivation and personal qualities. However, this team of researchers focus more on the resource problems such as the lack of information, knowledge capital, financial literacy, and social capital to access the opportunities (e.g., in financial industries) rather than personal shortcomings. Several more researchers have identified and categorised the challenges faced by EWDs. Csillag et al. (2019) categorise the barriers and supporting factors as personal (self, family and friends), economic (business-related), and social (society and environment). Although the challenges seem similar across all types of entrepreneurs regardless of disadvantaged status, the severity and the likelihood of encountering these challenges may differ. Mohammed and Jamil (2015) test of a set of barriers, e.g., market prejudices, business contacts, finance, experience, role models, self-belief, and government support. They find that EWDs are more likely to encounter these barriers compared to non-disabled entrepreneurs.

Notably, a small number of studies consider an alternative form of venture creation such as social entrepreneurship (SE) as a possible means of helping EWDs overcome the structural barriers and generate further employment (Anderson and Galloway 2012; Parker Harris, et al. 2014b; Renko et al. 2016). This approach aiming at equal participation opportunities are somewhat different from directly addressing EWD's deficit vis-à-vis the barriers identified. The authors of the Chicago studies conclude that there is further potential for social entrepreneurship but it has been underutilised in practice (Parker Harris, et al. 2014b).

Not much has been expanded regarding opportunities present for particular types of EWDs, sector, or country. However, given that entrepreneurial traits are comparable between non-disabled and disabled entrepreneurs, the numerous barriers that EWDs are more likely to encounter would put them at a significant disadvantage. 'Traditional' entrepreneurship research might not be sufficiently equipped for advancing the understanding of EWDs and other entrepreneurs from disadvantaged social groups.

Thematic finding 3: According to the extant literature, the availability of entrepreneurial opportunities to EWDs are influenced by barriers on multiple levels – societal, market, personal

Competences, training, and education

The issue of competences often features as an important barrier for EWDs. Bagheri and Abbariki (2017) identify competencies and categorise them into two areas – personal and functional. Personal competences include attitudinal competencies, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship learning self-efficacy. Functional competencies include entrepreneurial competencies, commitment and social competencies. These competences do not differ much from generic entrepreneurial

competences (Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010). However, there is an emphasis on social competence, which is a key factor influencing such things as profitability and access to finance (Esteban Lloret and Rubio Bañón 2019). The problem could be as Larsson (2006, p. 162) explains regarding the higher average age of EWDs compared to other entrepreneurs, as EWDs live in ‘a society that has mainly been shaped to meet other people’s abilities, which means that the accumulation of knowledge, in their case, takes a much longer time’.

Concerning improvement needs, a few papers have touched upon specialised training for EWDs. Anderson and Galloway (2012) explore the role of enterprise training for disabled people, especially regarding pedagogical approaches such as modern constructivism and experiential learning. A successful case presented involves explicit core skills (e.g., numeracy, IT, business) and tacit core skills (e.g., confidence and motivation). The authors also note the success in building self-esteem, social skills, and social capital through improved confidence and communication skills.

Empowering EWDs with training and development is also addressed by a few researchers. Balcazar et al.,—(2014) exemplify an entrepreneurship programme sponsored by the US Department of Labour. It has been created to counteract barriers, empower, and facilitate economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities. This initiative includes a course on business planning, one-to-one mentoring, technical assistance, start-up grants, and business incubator. Sefotho (2015) points to the need for business training and business development, as the existing provisions in vocational schools are limited to ‘manual work’. Building ‘career management skills’ would be essential to any kind of job. Involving EWDs in an ongoing process is important to shift the mindset from receiving. From insecurity to independence (Van Niekerk et al. 2006), partnerships should be carefully considered and managed (Lorenzo et al. 2007). Especially in the case of EWDs, parents and support people ideally should also receive training (Saxena and Pandya, 2018).

Thematic finding 4: According to the extant literature, entrepreneurial competences development is central to empowering EWDs and overcoming barriers

The support structure and network

Many of the barriers for EWDs are systemic ones, meaning that those without external support are disadvantaged. Various studies have underlined the importance of support, both formal and informal, given to EWDs. For example, a study by Parker Harris et al. (2014b) considers the role of government, funding, and culture to influence self-employment by PWDs. Further, Jasniak et al. (2018) indicate that entrepreneurial self-efficacy and general social support are positively associated with social entrepreneurial appraisal, suggesting that networking and relationships encourage EWDs in their willingness to create social ventures. As also noted by Caldwell et al. (2019), social entrepreneurs with intellectual disability rely on both formal and informal networks, but to an even greater extent in comparison to entrepreneurs with physical disabilities.

Some studies emphasise the importance of the informal support network, which could be even more influential than formal institutional instruments, where there is a lack of state benefits. According to India’s study by Saxena and Pandya’s (2019), educational, informal support to EWDs themselves, and their family members

play a crucial role. However the importance of a viable ‘entrepreneurial ecosystem’ as a whole should not be negated. Csillag et al. (2019) also point to crucial informal support network in their Hungarian study, but the unfavourable entrepreneurial ecosystem means there is a lack of special support or useful training tailored for EWDs.

Thematic finding 5: According to the extant literature, EWDs require formal support structure and informal support network, and the latter’s importance is amplified in the absence of the former

Non-economic value of entrepreneurship

Although most studies start with examining entrepreneurship as linking to economic independence (Olmedo-Cifuentes and Martínez-León 2019), self-sufficiency (Balcazar et al. 2014), or new venture creation (Anderson and Galloway 2012), other non-economic values of entrepreneurship have also become visible. In their study of a successful development programme which has resulted in several new firms being created by EWDs, Anderson and Galloway (2012, p. 100) point to ‘less quantifiable but perhaps just as valuable’ success is in building self-esteem, social skills, and social capital.

Personal and social development is an important by-product identified in several studies reviewed here. Entrepreneurial activities for EWDs, performance in the behaviours and activities required to create a business are associated with social-psychological improvements, linked to satisfaction with work, and happiness in life in general. In other words, entrepreneurial action may be influencing improvements in self-image (Martin and Honig 2020). Even without apparent economic success, Boellstorff (2018) observes the near therapeutic quality of participating in online entrepreneurship activities that may not generate any income (and may even cost the ‘entrepreneurs’ money). He observes the ‘interplay of selfhood, work, and value’ though it remains ‘embedded in forms of inequality’ (Boellstorff 2018, p. 11). Creativity and contribution, not just initiative and risk, can also characterise an EWD.

Entrepreneurship may also benefit PWDs on a collective level. The more normalised entrepreneurship and EWDs become, the better the society is at combating stereotypes about disability (Mota et al. 2020). Pavey (2006) emphasise the importance of human capital and social capital in inclusive engagement and entrepreneurship. Parker Harris et al. (2014a) call for a shift from focusing on self-sufficiency to understanding entrepreneurship as innovation, to integrate entrepreneurship into disability employment research and policy.

Thematic finding 6: According to the extant literature, entrepreneurial activities generate non-economic value by way of personal development and enabling social integration

Discussion: Thematic findings and the purpose of entrepreneurship for and by disabled people

We started the review process by outlining the framework that juxtaposes the literature to the individual-opportunity (IO) nexus asserts that entrepreneurial opportunities are found rather than made and that some individuals are more suitable for entrepreneurship than others (Shane 2003; Shane and Venkataraman 2000). This

central assumption has raised some questions over how its applicability to understanding entrepreneurship by PWDs or disadvantaged individuals can be used in general.

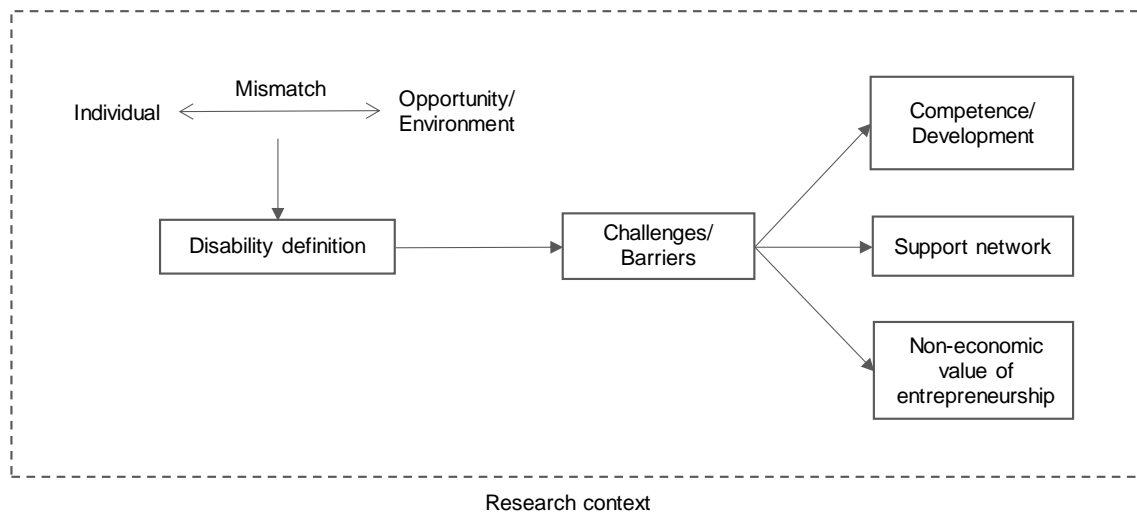


Figure 2 Review framework

The use of IO nexus as the point of departure for the review framework (Figure 2) reveals some entrepreneurship limitations as a policy choice to alleviate disabled people's socio-economic problems. Thematic findings 1-3 indicate a degree of inconsistency between the structural and individual levels of analysis.

- Thematic finding 1: According to the extant literature, the term disability is related to structural hindrance for EWDs
- Thematic finding 2: According to the extant literature, overcoming multi-level challenges for EWDs is related mainly to adaptive mechanisms at an individual level
- Thematic finding 3: According to the extant literature, the availability of entrepreneurial opportunities to EWDs are influenced by barriers on multiple levels – societal, market, personal

As far as EWDs go, the starting assumption in virtually all the articles we review is that the playing field is not even. While there is no contradiction to the objective view of opportunities that exist independent of observers and entrepreneurs, disability can be fundamental to how PWDs experience the world (Hughes 2007). The IO nexus is written as a 'general' theory of entrepreneurship and also mirrors the observations made in disability studies that the non-disability is assumed a normative standard for individuals (Oliver 1990). The ableist flavour should not come as a surprise, as it is in line with a long-standing critique of entrepreneurship research as 'gender-biased, ethnocentrically determined and ideologically controlled' (Ogbor 2000, p. 605). However, it has some consequences on how theoretical antecedents and performance outcomes (i.e., successful exploitation of opportunities) are understood and translated into practice. As observed in the thematic findings 2 and 3, most of the adaptive mechanisms that are suggested for EWDs mainly concern individual EWDs

themselves, perhaps to bridge the ability gap to discover and exploit the opportunities that already exist and could in principle be exploited by any other entrepreneur. The neoliberal perspective assigning the burden of correcting structural shortcomings to individuals is perhaps not the most helpful or even a realistic one, given the barriers entrenched in the societal and economic institutions (Hughes 2017).

In addition, the definition of entrepreneurship as the process of discovering, evaluating, and exploiting opportunities with the aim towards the market outcome (e.g., company formation or IPO) is perhaps unnecessarily restrictive in this context given the thematic findings 4, 5 and 6 as follows:

- Thematic finding 4: According to the extant literature, entrepreneurial competences development is central to empowering EWDs and overcoming barriers
- Thematic finding 5: According to the extant literature, EWDs require a formal support structure and informal support network, and the latter's importance is amplified in the absence of the former
- Thematic finding 6: According to the extant literature, entrepreneurial activities generate non-economic value by way of personal development and enabling social integration

As well as helping EWDs overcome resource and skills deficit (cf. Bischoff et al. 2020), these thematic findings point to the roles of entrepreneurial development as emancipation and empowerment, which implicitly link to, for example, unemployment problems and the need for economic independence among disabled people (e.g., Anderson and Galloway 2012; Parker Harris, et al. 2014a). These findings suggest that the value of entrepreneurship for PWDs goes beyond economic means of integrating into society and personal development in various forms, such as business acumen, social skills, and self-esteem. In this sense, entrepreneurship seems to be perceived unintentionally as a process involving certain intentions and individual characteristics regardless of eventual economic outcomes. On a collective level, entrepreneurship by EWDs and the visibility it brings would likely counteract stereotypes and normalise the ability of the disabled (Mota et al. 2020), something that has long been discussed in organisational behaviour (Stone and Colella 1996).

We argue that this view of entrepreneurship is a more realistic one for its purpose as a mass policy choice aiming at 'disability' as an entire social category. If there is no way to make everyone an entrepreneur in the general population, how would it work for disabled people *en masse*? Indeed, not much has been explicated in research so far as to how 'inequality, social stratification, and social mobility affect what entrepreneurs attempt and are able to do' (Welter et al. 2019, p. 326). More tangibly, unrealistic performance expectations can be created. There must be a certain number of EWDs created in a certain timeframe, notwithstanding the high failure rate that is already evident in new firm creation generally (Shane 2009). Such expectations can be dangerous and unsustainable. A cautionary parallel could already be observed in academic entrepreneurship and technology transfer where performance metrics and perverse application of entrepreneurship has led to gaming and scepticism (Lockett et al. 2015).

Critical points for consideration in disability entrepreneurship research

For further research to be both theoretically rigorous and practically relevant for disabled people, there is a need to mitigate the limitations of a positivist, market-focused, and deterministic view of entrepreneurship. To encourage this direction of travel, we suggest two critical points that should be considered before recommending future research.

The role of context in which EWDs are embedded

Context refers to who, where, when of the phenomenon of interest. In the variance-theoretic approach, such as that of the IO nexus where certain determinants lead to entrepreneurship outcome, some of the contextual factors are modelled into the predictive framework. However, the problem remains when the same approach is employed in a less familiar context where the predictive theoretical models have limited generalisability (Whetten 1989).

As we have observed in this review, it is not as if the context has been ignored, but instead they have not been fully recognised as ‘a declared, substantive aspect of a particular research study’ (Johns 2006, p. 389). Contextualisation is especially crucial as the scope of entrepreneurship is wide and varied. It also deals with the creation of new things, which is not yet well appreciated in current research (Welter 2011; Welter et al. 2019). Context and entrepreneurial individuals, can directly influence entrepreneurial activities (Dorado and Ventresca 2013), and the lack of understanding is perhaps more serious in emerging economies (Foo et al. 2020).

In terms of theory development, Johns (2017) argues that conscious effort to recognise the context would reveal the boundary conditions of theories, and at the same time, provide opportunities to extend the scope of theory and facilitate practical applications. Therefore, understanding context – dynamics, uniqueness, and limitations – could enhance both rigour and relevance of the research (Zahra 2007). Theories might be borrowed from mainstream entrepreneurship or other disciplines. Even though some challenges are presented, opportunities to make contributions both ‘of theory and to theory’ are existing (Whetten 2009, p. 30).

In practice, theory borrowing needs a ‘native understanding’ of social contexts along with thorough understanding of the theory (Whetten 2009, p. 46). The use of participatory research is a potential; the examples of which could be found in this review in the participatory action research project in South Africa (Lorenzo et al. 2007; Van Niekerk et al. 2006). In the said project, members of the social context brought in their understanding and lived experiences to enhance the analysis of researchers who acted as theoretical experts (cf. Williams and Mavin 2012). In addition to facilitating research contextualisation in an academic sense, participation by the individuals who would otherwise be considered research ‘subjects’ also represents an opportunity for empowerment in research practice (Kemmis 2006). Hence, using participatory research to investigate this topic aligns with our position regarding the purpose of entrepreneurship as the policy of choice to empower and develop disadvantaged individuals.

Influences of, and between, different levels of analysis

In general, context is interesting because we assume it has some influences on individuals within it. In the variance-theoretic fashion, contextual antecedents are causally related to entrepreneurial outcomes (Ucbasaran et al. 2001), though this view might be somewhat restrictive when applied to disability entrepreneurship. As De Clercq and Honig (2011) argue, the understanding of entrepreneurship by

disadvantaged persons is not possible without considering the power-laden mechanisms present when individuals interact with various institutions such as banks, government agencies, buyers and suppliers, media, other entrepreneurs as well as amongst themselves. The challenge unique to these entrepreneurs is the balancing act – they are expected to comply with conventions but because they are different, they are expected to be not exactly like other entrepreneurs – as addressed by Ng and Arndt (2019) in this review. The game, therefore, is possible to challenge the existing arrangements in the field to their advantage without upsetting key conventions. A scenario such as this limits the explanatory power of causal models such as the IO nexus which assumes a mainstream context.

The missing piece, as highlighted by Packard (2017) according to the interpretivist perspective, is intentionality which explains the source of entrepreneurship by individuals, as opposed to deterministic effects of certain variables. The relationship between context, organisations, and individuals is therefore not one-way but involves feedback and struggles. It is not only the context that asserts influence on individuals, but also the other way around. Successful entrepreneurs from a disadvantaged social group may need reflexivity and agency to influence the institutional environment and mitigate structural barriers (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Smets et al. 2012), rather than simply correcting their shortcomings to be like model entrepreneurs as implicitly suggested where barriers are concerned (Hsieh et al. 2019; Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2017).

Future research avenues

Entrepreneurship research in general ‘espouses a diverse range of theories applied to various kinds of phenomena’ (Gartner 2001, p. 34). Likewise, the possible avenues for research in disability entrepreneurship are numerous. For a complex phenomenon involving little understood entrepreneurs and contexts, openness for a diverse range of theories and perspectives will be crucial for progress. We would even argue that for research to make a difference to PWDs and society, it might become increasingly difficult to maintain a value-free, objective stance devoid of ideology which is already infused with how disability is defined to begin with (Hughes 2007; Oliver 1990; Shakespeare and Watson 2001). It is important to move away from doing research *on*, and towards researching *with* disabled people as active agents in knowledge production (Oliver 1992; Williams and Mavin 2012). Following from the review framework, we highlight three areas of interest as follows:

Opportunity perception

Given the relatively uncontroversial notion that impairment and disability influence PWDs’ relationship with others and the social world (Hughes 2017), a better understanding of how EWDs recognise, perceive, and exploit opportunities would be helpful both in theory and practice. So far, research has covered some grounds regarding EWDs traits and the interventions made to/for them, but a more detailed account of individual experience is not easy to find. While it is true that the opportunity construct (Shane and Venkataraman 2000) has become rather nebulous as it gained popularity and diffused over time, resulting in inconsistencies in theory building (Davidsson 2015), the very question of how EWDs initiates the genesis of their firms remains crucial. To this end, similar studies in non-disabled entrepreneurs may provide a good starting point. Further research into this area will likely require

clarifying what counts as an opportunity and its related undertakings (Suddaby et al. 2015) and a deeper understanding of disability experiences.

Entrepreneurial competencies in EWDs

Our review has shown that the types of competencies required from EWDs are not entirely distinct from those of non-disabled literature (Man et al. 2002), and more could be investigated into the nature of said competencies. Possible questions that directly follow the existing research include how competencies are developed (or not) through interventions such as training, how or whether competencies can be measured in EWDs, and how competencies evolve as EWDs gain business experience. Another line of questions that we think would be important for both practice and theory development is the potential social nature of competencies (e.g., Nonaka and Konno 1998 on social learning), given the key role of support network for EWDs and the influence of the social world on disability experience. We would, however, suggest a point of caution regarding the social and human cost of entrepreneurship. Going overboard with pursuing entrepreneurship abilities and ideals such as devotion or risk-taking has deteriorated the well-being of entrepreneurs and those around them (Wright and Zahra 2011).

Non-economic value of entrepreneurship

Tihanyi (2020) observes that most practical implications accompanying entrepreneurship research address short-term profit motives rather than longer-term management benefits that extend to society. Our review shows that there could be an important, albeit often unquantifiable, non-economic value in introducing PWDs to entrepreneurship, regardless of the market outcome. Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) demonstrate that entrepreneurship can create social value in multiple forms and on different levels, marking its way of success, although econometric metrics do not readily capture it. In the research we have reviewed, however, this notion is more of a by-product than a phenomenon consciously investigated. While social value is a major theme in social entrepreneurship (e.g., Mair and Martí 2006), it is mostly centred on firms rather than individuals. To progress in this area, we should see growth and firm creation as means rather than ends (Korsgaard and Anderson 2011).

Conclusion

Disability entrepreneurship is an emerging field with great potential for theory, policy, and practice. As with any nascent body of knowledge, moving forward entails some challenges inherent to the newness itself – such as poorly understood characteristics of disabled entrepreneurs and their operating contexts – and the limitations inherent to the existing approaches to entrepreneurship research that may not translate well to an unfamiliar phenomenon of interest. Using the individual-opportunity nexus as a starting point, our review has shown these challenges to be the case. For entrepreneurship to function as a development policy, we make a case for thinking beyond ‘correcting’ individual shortcomings and looking at entrepreneurship as a means for development rather than fixating on economic outcomes as the definition of success. Critical appreciation of entrepreneurship research in relation to the lived experiences of disabled people is crucial. It will likely be extendable to facilitate advances in entrepreneurship by other disadvantaged groups and vice versa.

A greater variety of perspectives and theories will be crucial for progress, particularly when it comes to understanding context and entrepreneurs' interaction with the institutional environment. Amongst the many possible research avenues, we highlight three areas based on our review: opportunity, competence, and non-economic value of entrepreneurship for disabled people. Overall, it is an exciting time for researchers to contribute to a topical global challenge and find innovative approaches to building a new body of knowledge while doing so.

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