**Identity as a Causal Power: Contextualising Entrepreneurs’ Concerns**

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**Objectives**

This paper proposes a critical realist-informed conception of entrepreneurial identity – defined as a personal power to create a new venture. As a causal power, entrepreneurial identity is a potentiality, rather than a fixed characteristic determining behaviour, or a narrative practice that the power generates. Although most people have the power to become an entrepreneur, not everyone can, or is motivated to, realise that potential because of other countervailing powers – personal, material and socio-cultural – that constrain, or discourage, action. Utilising a stratified and emergent ontology, we contextualise entrepreneurial identity within three analytical orders – natural, practical and social. We distinguish personal identity, the set of concerns in the three orders that motivate action, from social identity, the public roles we commit to in society. While entrepreneurial identity is a type of social identity, we argue that the underlying concerns that motivate commitment to an entrepreneurial role cannot be reduced to social interaction alone. Human relations with nature and the material culture of artefacts importantly shape entrepreneurial identity. The concept of internal conversation is used to theorise the connection of entrepreneurial motivation, context and venture creation. We draw on qualitative data from three UK-based disabled entrepreneurs to demonstrate the value of our framework.

**Literature review**

Most entrepreneurial identity studies reject the notion of a lone entrepreneur, isolated from the wider context. Studies highlight the role of the social context in shaping entrepreneurial identity. Within what we term the ‘constructionist approach’, two related streams of literature dominate, with varying emphases on the agency-structure relationship. The first stream focuses on how agents narratively construct entrepreneurial identity by interacting with others. The second highlights how dominant enterprise discourses and stereotypes in society empower some to become an entrepreneur, while excluding others from accomplishing entrepreneurial identity.

Constructionist approaches, we argue, have reached an impasse in terms of their power to explain why the entrepreneurs they study express themselves narratively as they do. We agree that entrepreneurial identity, defined in terms of concerns rather than narrative practices, is importantly formed through socio-cultural interaction. But what is missing from the constructionist accounts are entrepreneurs’ relations with the wider natural and practical contexts within which entrepreneurs operate as embodied agents.

Conceptualising entrepreneurial identity as a narrative practice, performed primarily in the social context, has implications for researchers’ ability to theorise the material realities of disabled entrepreneurs’ lives, including: (1) the causal powers of the natural and practical orders as well as the social in enabling or constraining entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour; and (2) the effects of embodied properties, such as ill-health or impairment, on personal concerns and the motivation to pursue venture creation. This has consequences for researching entrepreneurial identity.

**Approach / Method**

Using a theoretical sampling approach, we draw on interview data from three entrepreneurs – Sarah, Garry and David – who acquired severe mobility impairment during adulthood, and started a business following the onset of impairment. The data collection was explicitly theory-driven; we applied our concepts to investigate entrepreneurs’ personal concerns and internal conversations, supporting our theoretical assumptions. The lead author conducted semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews between 2013 and 2015. Each interview, lasting 1-2 hours, consisted of open-ended questions. These were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. We employed abductive and retroductive forms of inference, and used NVivo 11 to organise, code and analyse the data.

Our specific focus is on how personal concerns in the three orders – natural, practical and social – shape the motivation to pursue, and to commit to, venture creation. This conceptual framework facilitates our analysis, particularly in terms of interpreting three dimensions: first, participants’ concerns with well-being, performative achievement and self-worth in the three orders; second, emotions that generated particular commentaries on participants’ concerns and motivated venture creation; and third, emotional elaborations over time that prompted the transition from the initial consideration of venture creation to entrepreneurial commitment.

**Results / Findings**

Embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions, can both enable and constrain individual capacities that shape personal concerns and motivate venture creation. Although embodied properties, powers and liabilities, do not determine entrepreneurial behaviour, they do impact on entrepreneurial action and identity formation.

The onset of impairment shapes personal identity, the unique set of concerns in *all* three orders – natural, practical and social. Concerns with physical well-being in nature (for instance, resting when tired), influence performative achievement in the material culture (for example, using public transport) and, necessarily, concerns with self-worth in the social order (for example, communicating effectively), with implications for individual motivation to pursue, and to commit to, venture creation. Although entrepreneurial identity is a type of social identity, personal concerns that motivate venture creation cannot be reduced to social interaction alone.

The concept of internal conversation is applied to explain the transition from entrepreneurial motivation to venture creation in terms of three stages – concerns, consideration and commitment. Entrepreneurs reflected on their personal *concerns* in the three orders, and how they feel about them, to assess what matters to them most. This prompted them to *consider* venture creation as a way of prioritising some concerns over others, before eventually arriving at a decision to invest themselves in, and *commit* to, an entrepreneurial role. It is at the stage of commitment that they acted on their various concerns to become a particular kind of entrepreneur.

**Value and implications**

Conceptualising entrepreneurial identity as a personal power has specific implications for researchers’ ability to analyse the causal powers and mechanisms that underpin entrepreneurs’ behaviours and narrative performances. Researchers must attend to personal embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions, to fully explain entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour. We highlighted impairment effects; however, all entrepreneurs are uniquely embodied. This challenges the simplicity of the disabled / non-disabled binary and frames entrepreneurs as a heterogeneous group in terms of embodied powers and liabilities. To fully understand the conditions that make the emergence of entrepreneurial identity possible, researchers must explicitly theorise entrepreneurs’ relations with nature and the material culture of artefacts as well as the propositional culture of discourses. Personal concerns and motivations cannot arise simply through social interaction. This makes necessary the distinction of personal identity and social identity as two irreducible identity strata. Although entrepreneurial identity can only be assumed in society, personal identity is much broader and regulates our relations with *all* three orders. Finally, we draw attention to the concept of internal conversation to explain the transition from entrepreneurial motivation to venture creation. Contemporary entrepreneurial identity literature tends to under-theorise these links, or implicitly assumes them.

**Introduction**

People’s relationship to the world is one of ‘concern’ (Sayer, 2011). People do not simply think and act; we evaluate relationships, practices and events in relation to what we care about and what we perceive enables us to flourish, or holds us back. People, therefore, pursue particular roles and relationships to further their concerns (Archer, 2000). One of those concerns may be to accomplish entrepreneurial identity – defined as a personal power to create a new venture. Central to our conception of entrepreneurial identity are personal *concerns* that motivate actionrather than the narrative *practices* that such concerns can generate (author ref). We draw upon qualitative data from a study of disabled entrepreneurs to support a novel conception of entrepreneurial identity that demonstrates the connections between motivation, context and behaviour.

In this paper, we adopt a critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 2008) to conceive of entrepreneurial identity as an agential causal power that exerts influence on action independently of its narrative expression by entrepreneurs, or its conceptualisation by researchers (author ref). This makes our conception of entrepreneurial identity very different to the constructionist approaches that define it in terms of narrative practice (Díaz García and Welter, 2013; Down, 2006). Narrative performances are quite distinct from the concern to establish oneself as an entrepreneur, or a particular type of entrepreneur, although enacting narrative performances might be one means by which entrepreneurial identity is accomplished in practice. Constructionist approaches, we argue, have reached an impasse in terms of their ability to explain why the entrepreneurs they study self-narrate as they do. This is a major gap in our understanding and levels of theorising.

The conceptual framework presented in this paper permits deeper explanations. As a causal power (Bhaskar, 2008), entrepreneurial identity is a potentiality, rather than a fixed characteristic of entrepreneurs determining behaviour (Chen et al., 1998), or a dynamic and fluid process (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) enacted through narrative and discursive practices (Anderson and Warren, 2011). Although most people have the power to become an entrepreneur not everyone can, or is motivated to, exercise and realise that potential because of various countervailing powers that enable or constrain, encourage or discourage, agents. Personal concerns that motivate venture creation are of course distinct from the power to create a new venture. Our specific focus is to illustrate how entrepreneurial identity is realised through the connection of motivation, context and behaviour.

Utilising a stratified and emergent ontology of personhood and identity (Archer, 2000; Marks and O’Mahoney, 2014; Smith, 2010), our conceptualisation of entrepreneurial identity has three elements that distinguish it from social constructionist approaches. First, we contextualise entrepreneurial identity in relation to three analytical orders of reality: natural, practical and social. Identity formation cannot be reduced to social relations alone. Second, we distinguish personal identity, a set of concerns in the three orders that makes each of us a unique person, from social identity, the public roles in which we can invest ourselves and be committed to. Being an entrepreneur is one such social identity. Third, we argue that personal concerns are necessarily embodied. People have properties – both powers and liabilities – by virtue of their variable embodiment that motivate them to attend to particular concerns, to perform particular practices and to commit to particular social roles.

Entrepreneurial identity can only be assumed in the social order, in our relations with other people within a market economy (Down and Reveley, 2004; Essers et al., 2010; Watson, 2009). Personal identity, however, is much broader and regulates our relations with *all* three orders (Archer, 2000). To survive and thrive, each person must attend to their concerns with physical well-being in nature (for instance, resting when tired), with performative achievement in the material culture (for example, learning how to drive a car) and with self-worth in society (for example, working to support a family) (Archer, 2000). It is how we prioritise and balance our various concerns in the three orders that makes one a unique person, and a particular kind of entrepreneur.

Interview data from a UK study of disabled entrepreneurs is analysed using this conceptual framework, supporting our novel conception of entrepreneurial identity. We draw on original data from three entrepreneurs, Sarah, Garry and David, who have created new ventures following the onset of impairment or a long-term health condition in adulthood. Our specific focus is to illustrate how their concerns with physical well-being, performative achievement and self-worth, motivate venture creation and commitment to an entrepreneurial role. We employ Archer’s (2000) concept of *internal conversation,* or self-talk, to theorise the linkages between entrepreneurial motivation, context and behaviour. We show how embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions, enable as well as constrain personal capacities which, in turn, shape concerns in *all* three orders – natural, practical and social. The three sets of concerns have implications for entrepreneurial motivation and the capacity to commit to venture creation.

We start with a review of the entrepreneurial identity literature; identifying gaps related to the effects of personal powers, nature and material culture, on entrepreneurial motivation. Next, we present our theoretical framework, linking personal concerns that motivate venture creation, context and entrepreneurial behaviour. We then describe our methodological approach, and report findings that illustrate the value of our approach. The paper concludes by summarising our theoretical contributions and implications for future research.

**A review and critique of prior research: identity constructed in society**

Most entrepreneurial identity studies reject the notion of a lone entrepreneur, isolated from the wider context. Studies highlight the role of the social environment in shaping entrepreneurial identity (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011; Alsos et al., 2016; Anderson and Warren, 2011; Down and Reveley, 2004; Essers et al., 2010; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2015; Reveley and Down, 2009; Warren, 2004; Watson, 2009). Within what we term the ‘constructionist approach’, two related streams of literature are dominant with varying emphases on the agency-structure relationship. The first focuses on how agents narratively construct entrepreneurial identity by interacting with others (Bjursell and Melin, 2011; Boje and Smith, 2010; Díaz García and Welter, 2013; Down, 2006; Down and Warren, 2008; Downing, 2005; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Hytti, 2005; Hytti et al., 2017; Johansson, 2004; Jones et al.*,* 2008; Phillips et al.*,* 2013; Warren, 2004). The second stream highlights how dominant enterprise discourses and stereotypes in society empower some to become an entrepreneur, while excluding others (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Boje and Smith, 2010; Cohen and Musson, 2000; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Gill and Larson, 2014; Larson and Pearson, 2012; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005).

We agree that entrepreneurial identity is formed through social and cultural interaction. But what is missing from constructionist accounts are entrepreneurs’ relations with the wider natural and practical context within which they operate as embodied agents(author ref). Conceptualising entrepreneurial identity solely as a narrative or discursive practice has serious limitations for researchers’ capacity to theorise the material realities of disabled entrepreneurs’ lives, including: (1) the causal powers of the natural and practical orders *as well as* the social, in enabling and constraining entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour; *and* (2) the effects of embodied properties, such as ill-health or impairment, on personal concerns and the motivation to pursue venture creation. We discuss the consequences for constructionist studies of entrepreneurial identity in more detail.

*Under-theorised powers of nature and material culture*

Studies typically under-theorise the influence of nature and material culture on entrepreneurs’ capacities, concerns and motivations. Yet, the natural and practical orders constitute a crucial and unavoidable part of the context of entrepreneurial action. Natural powers, such as climate and environmental disasters, can cause business closures (Zhang et al., 2013) as well as incentivising business creation (Brück et al., 2011; Monllor and Murphy, 2017). Artefacts designed with able-bodied people foremost in mind can constrain other users, but they can also stimulate novel product ideas and further development of the material culture. Technologies are not only symbolic markers of self-identification with, or differentiation from, others as Down and Reveley (2004) show, but are also artefacts that extend our bodily powers (for example, hearing aids), or equally, constrain us from achieving our goals (for example, inaccessible buildings).

Larson and Pearson (2012) note that the material/physical aspects of place, such as mountains, afford or limit symbolic activities and meanings, arguing that such places are “…understood and experienced through discourse.” (2012, p. 245). Gill and Larson (2014) examine how a particular place shapes and constrains the possibilities for constructing an ‘ideal entrepreneurial self’. But in emphasising constructed ‘meanings’ as opposed to the actual embodied ‘doings’ of entrepreneurs, the authors under-play the material effects of place on the capacity to act and to form sought-after social identities, including being an entrepreneur.

For Gill and Larson, “…place is not a fixed, bounded dimension of identity, but a discourse that can be challenged, fragmented and (re)appropriated.” (2014, p. 539). This conflates the material properties of places with agents’ discursive practices about them. Places are materially configured spaces incorporating the natural world and human-made artefacts; they are not just ways of talking. Places possess properties that are more often than notfixed, at least in the short-term. Inaccessible public transport, for instance, excludes people from places, from meeting potential clients, and from performing entrepreneurial roles. Entrepreneurs cannot, for example, make inaccessible buildings accessible simply by re-describing them.

*Under-theorised personal embodied powers and liabilities*

Constructionist studies rightly reject biological determinism associated with personality traits theories (Down and Warren, 2008; Reveley and Down, 2009). Studies in this tradition, however, reduce entrepreneurial identity to linguistic practices and under-theorise the effects of embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions (Author ref), on entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour. In contrast, our conception of entrepreneurial identity as *concerns* emergent from embodied properties, highlights that human embodiment shapes, but does not determine, behaviour. Equally, impairment effects can significantly impact on entrepreneurial motivation regardless of whether entrepreneurs narratively express their concerns with physical well-being to a researcher. All entrepreneurs are enabled and constrained, in different ways, by their embodied properties, both powers and liabilities.

Where the connection between motivation and behaviour is theorised, studies highlight that entrepreneurs’ behaviours are shaped primarily through how they perceive themselves in relation to others (Alsos et al., 2016; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Gruber and MacMillan, 2017). Although such studies assume an agent motivated to pursue venture creation, entrepreneurial motivation arises exclusively through social relations. We extend this theorising by framing entrepreneurial identity as a causal power, emergent from our embodied interaction with nature and material culture as well as society. We develop our argument by explicating personal identityand entrepreneurial identity as two distinct identity strata, enabling us to examine: first, human relations with *all* three orders, and not just the social context, as influences on entrepreneurial motivation; and, second, the linkages between personal concerns in the three orders, the consideration to pursue venture creation, and the commitment to an entrepreneurial role as distinct phases of the internal conversation that drives the transition from entrepreneurial motivation to behaviour.

**Theoretical framework: identity emergent in nature, material culture and society**

Entrepreneurial identity, from our critical realist-informed viewpoint (Archer, 2000; Bhaskar, 2008; Marks and O’Mahoney, 2014; Smith, 2010), is a causal power rather than a narrative or discursive practice. As a causal power, entrepreneurial identity is a potentiality or a tendency that may be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealised or realised unperceived (Bhaskar, 2008). Although most people have the power to become an entrepreneur, not everyone can, or is motivated to, realise that potential. Other countervailing powers can constrain, or discourage, an individual’s pursuit of an entrepreneurial role. While constructionist studies treat entrepreneurial identity as a process of becoming (Bjursell and Melin, 2011; Down and Warren, 2008; Gherardi, 2015; Leitch and Harrison, 2016), we theorise the underlying causal powers – personal, material and socio-cultural – that generate becoming.

Entrepreneurial identity, we argue, is a particular kind of causal power – a personal power to create a new venture. Entrepreneurial identity therefore presupposes an agent possessing particular embodied properties that shape their motivation to pursue, and to commit to, venture creation. Our conception of entrepreneurial identity highlights personal *concerns* that motivate action, rather than narrative and discursive *practices*, as central to identity formation. Identity formation is a human capacity to maintain or transform one’s sense of self, as a unique person, in relation to the wider context beyond social relations (Archer, 2000; Smith, 2010). This differs from ‘identity work’ – a concept that seeks to bridge the self with socially available discourses and identities (Watson, 2008). Agents can work and re-work their social identities, but only up to a point (Author ref).

Identity formation depends on our interaction with three analytical orders of reality: natural, practical and social (Archer, 2000). Who we are as persons cannot be reduced to social relations alone. Each person possesses embodied properties, both powers and liabilities, that shape identity formation and action (Archer, 2000; Smith, 2010). Particular impairments, for example, can be both enabling as well as constraining, depending on conditions and powers of nature, material culture and society influencing our action. Personal embodied powers and liabilities importantly shape, but do not determine, identity formation and behaviour.

Identity is emergent and stratified; Archer (2000) distinguishes three strata or levels of identity – the self, personal identity and social identity. *The self* is a continuous sense of being the same embodied human being over a life-time, distinct from other humans and other material objects. *Personal identity* is the unique constellation of concerns all human beings have in relation to the natural, practical and social orders; it is what makes each of us a particular person. *Social identity* refers to the relationships and roles that each person involuntarily occupies from birth (for example, daughter-mother) and to those that people commit to in their life-time (for example, becoming an entrepreneur). Of course, social roles – defined as the cultural norms and expectations of appropriate behaviour and appearance attached to particular social positions – do not determine behaviour and personal identity; people can act flexibly in a role to accommodate their various concerns. Each person will personify an entrepreneurial role in different ways within the limits set by the expectations of important others.

Although a social identity can only be assumed in society, personal identity is much broader and regulates our relations with *all* three orders (Archer, 2000). Concerns with physical well-being in the natural order (such as, coping with injury) can affect performative achievement in the practical order (for example, using a computer keyboard) and, necessarily, concerns with self-worth in the social order (for example, performing an entrepreneurial role successfully). While we must attend to our various concerns in each order simultaneously, the three sets of concerns are not of equal standing. Through *internal conversation*, or self-talk, we reflect on and evaluate our personal concerns, prioritising some while subordinating others (Archer, 2000; 2003). This balancing act affects the way we invest ourselves in, and commit to, particular social roles. Hence, personal identity importantly shapes individual motivation to pursue, and commit to, an entrepreneurial role.

How we prioritise our various concerns in the three orders depends on how we feel about them, or how much we care (Archer, 2000). Some concerns may be regarded as more important than others. Emotions act as commentaries on our concerns elicited through our embodied relations with each order, pertaining to: (1) environmental threat or benefit to the body in the natural order; (2) task ease or difficulty in the practical order; and (3) judgments of approval or disapproval rooted in social norms in the social order. In nature, emotions can be elicited by significant events that modify relations between the body and its environment. Fear, for instance, can manifest itself in each order. However, the emergence of fear in nature (for instance, fear of thunder) may not depend on our interaction with the other two orders. Emotions emergent from our relations with nature can, in turn, affect our actions in the practical order (for example, performative incompetence in using machinery) and in the social order (for example, failure to meet customer expectations). How we prioritise our various concerns, and feel about them, has implications for the emergence of entrepreneurial identity.

Strong emotions, such as pain or frustration, elicited by the onset of impairment or ill-health (natural order) can motivate venture creation (social order). Archer (2000) distinguishes ‘first-order’ emotions, triggered by our interaction with the three orders, from ‘second-order’ emotions which are the outcome of internal conversation and *emotional elaboration* – the process through which people evaluate how they feel about their various concerns and prioritise emotions. Three moments or stages of internal conversation – discernment, deliberation and dedication – precede second-order prioritisation of emotions. *Discernment* is a preliminary review of our concerns or ‘what we care about’. *Deliberation* is the moment of questioning, considering the worth of our various concerns or ‘how much do we care’. *Dedication* is when a strict personal identity, with a unique pattern of commitments, is fully formed. That is when a person motivated to pursue venture creation commits to an entrepreneurial role and acts on it.

A traumatic event, like bodily injury, can significantly impact on the sense of self when a person’s identity is closely linked to a career discontinued by injury (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011). The event can generate strong first-order emotions, such as helplessness, and shatter one’s assumptions about personal competence and self-worth. People adopt different coping strategies that influence how well they transition into a new career. Haynie and Shepherd looked at career transitions of soldiers disabled by war-time injuries who took part in an entrepreneurship retraining programme. Those who transitioned well have changed their approach over time from ‘emotion-focused coping’ aimed at alleviating distress (for example, by drinking excessively), toward ‘problem-focused coping’ aimed at addressing the underlying problem causing distress (for example, reflecting on the obstacles or talking to family). Adding to our understanding of emotional elaboration, the authors show that people experience significant emotional change during a career transition triggered by the onset of impairment.

As people disabled by injury, ill-health or impairment come to face their ‘new’ sense of embodied self, they must reflect on their personal concerns and situation in the world, and re-evaluate their “set of internalized and closely held beliefs and assumptions” (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011, p. 520) before they can commit to social roles and relationships that they can live with (Archer, 2000). Reflecting on personal *concerns* in the three orders, *considering* venture creation as a way of prioritising some concerns over others, and *committing* to an entrepreneurial role are distinct stages of internal conversation that help explain the linkages between entrepreneurial motivation, context and behaviour. The outcome is the emergence of entrepreneurial identity. What we care about is of course dynamic; our concerns may change over time as we continually re-evaluate our situation.

**Methodology**

*Selection of entrepreneurs*

The paper utilises qualitative data from three entrepreneurs – Sarah, Garry and David (anonymised) (Table 1). Using a theoretical sampling approach (Coyne, 1997), the three entrepreneurs were selected for several reasons. First, each acquired impairment during adulthood and started a business following the onset of impairment. Only Sarah had previous experience of self-employment before setting up her current business. Second, all three entrepreneurs had impairment that affects their mobility. Garry’s activities are also limited by hearing loss. All three had severe impairments in terms of having effects on their day-to-day and working practices. Third, disability was an important influence on the type of business started: each entrepreneur created a venture that offers a disability-related product or service. Finally, the selected entrepreneurs all provided rich commentaries on their internal conversations, including their concerns and emotional elaborations over time, supporting our theoretical assumptions.

**Table 1.**Entrepreneurs’ personal and business characteristics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | ***Sarah*** | ***Garry***  | ***David***  |
| **Impairment(s)1** | Degenerative spinal condition | Kidney failureRight leg amputation Hearing impairment | Chronic polyneuropathy Chronic fatigue syndrome |
| **Activity limitation(s)2** | Mobility (walking & moving, sitting, standing) | Mobility (walking & moving, standing) Communication (receiving spoken messages)  | Mobility (walking & moving, standing) |
| **Impairment stability** | Degenerative | Degenerative | Stable |
| **Age**  | 55 | 53 | 44 |
| **Ethnicity**  | White British  | White British | White British |
| **Sector**  | Specialist recruitment agency for disabled candidates  | Specialist fitness training company for injured  | Disability artist / creativity workshop organiser |
| **Year started**  | 2011 | 2006 | 2010 |
| **Employment size**  | 4 | 14 | 1 |

*Note:*

**1**Impairments are problems in body function or alterations in body structure – for example, paralysis or blindness (WHO/WB 2011).

**2**Activity limitations are difficulties in executing activities – for example, walking or communicating messages (WHO/WB 2011).

We focus on just three entrepreneurs to allow an in-depth analysis of the process of identity formation, as participants transitioned from entrepreneurial motivation to behaviour. This involves moving from (1) having particular concerns in the three orders; to (2) considering venture creation; to (3) committing oneself to an entrepreneurial role. The three entrepreneurs in the analysis were approached either directly, utilising a competition website where they self-identified as disabled entrepreneurs, or through an intermediary organisation for disabled professionals.

*Data collection*

Researching entrepreneurial identity as a personal power, emergent from a set of concerns that motivate commitment to an entrepreneurial role, entails more than an interview or discourse analysis. Our data collection was explicitly theory-driven (Smith and Elger, 2014) as we applied our conceptual framework to investigate entrepreneurs’ capacities, concerns and emotions. We asked specific questions about the effects of impairment on working and business practices, ease or difficulty in performing tasks, the effects of disability on the motivation to create a new venture, and the role of human-made artefacts, such as buildings and assistive technologies, in constraining or enabling activities.

The lead author conducted semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with the three entrepreneurs between August 2014 and September 2015. Each interview, lasting 1-2 hours, consisted of open-ended questions (Bryman and Bell, 2011), and each was transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Data include both retrospective reflections on events, concerns and emotions during the pre start-up and start-up period, as well as real-time reflections post start-up. While there are limits to autobiographical memory in self-reported retrospective accounts (Schwarz 2007), retrospective reporting is a common and viable methodology in management and organization studies (Miller et al., 1997).

Entrepreneurs’ descriptions of identity formation over time relied upon episodic memory which can provide comprehensive accounts of events (Tulving, 2002). These include jobs started, the onset of impairment, jobs left, when and where, and how they felt. Because episodic memory is importantly tied to our bodies’ experiences of the world, it tends to be a long-term memory and its recall has a quality of “reliving” of visual, kinesthetic and spatial impressions (Wilson, 2002). Participants’ accounts of their lived experience of disability and the transition into new venture creation generated trustworthy data, although all accounts are potentially fallible and open to reinterpretation (Danermark et al., 2002).

*Data analysis*

We employed abductive and retroductive forms of inference (Danermark et al., 2002) to analyse the data. This involved a number of stages. Abduction is a process of moving from concrete, observable events to the structures that generate them. We interpreted and re-contextualised entrepreneurs’ reported experiences of disability, the barriers faced in prior employment, and the motivation for venture creation using our theoretical framework. This enabled us to develop theories about the emergence and formation of entrepreneurial identity, for example, conceptualising concerns that motivate venture creation, rather than simply presenting entrepreneurs’ narrative practices. Retroduction is about asking what makes phenomena, such as entrepreneurial identity, possible objects of study. We theorised that entrepreneurial identity presupposes a number of lower-level personal powers that must be exercised. One such power, and the focus of this paper, is *the capacity to commit* *to venture creation* by acting on personal concerns.

Furthermore, our specific focus is on how personal concerns in the three orders – natural, practical and social – shape the motivation to pursue, and to commit to, venture creation. This conceptual framework facilitates our analysis, particularly in terms of interpreting three dimensions: first, participants’ concerns with well-being, performative achievement and self-worth in the three orders; second, emotions that generated particular commentaries on participants’ concerns and motivated venture creation; and third, emotional elaborations over time that prompted participants’ transitions from initial consideration of venture creation to entrepreneurial commitment. Interview transcripts were interpreted using our conceptual framework. For example, we interpreted negative employment experiences and the loss of dignity as concerns with self-worth in the social order that motivated career change. Experiences of pain or fatigue were interpreted as concerns with well-being in the natural order.

Our approach helps overcome some of the weaknesses in constructionist analyses of entrepreneurial identity. First, by emphasising narrative accounts, researchers risk reducing the study of entrepreneurial identity to descriptions of entrepreneurs’ linguistic performances. Second, analyses of enterprise discourses, similarly, risk reducing entrepreneurial identity to the stereotypical ways entrepreneurs are represented in popular media and policy and academic debates. In contrast, our view of identity as emergent and stratified encourages researchers to examine how the underlying causes, such as feelings of pain or frustration using artefacts, shape entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour. It encourages multi-level analyses that can explain the effects of the body, impaired or otherwise, on identity formation.

We used NVivo 11 to organise, code and analyse the interview transcript data. All coding was conducted by the lead author. Data was initially coded into nodes that reflect specific concepts within our theoretical framework, including personal concerns with well-being, performative achievement and self-worth. Although each person must attend to the three sets of concerns, each will attach different meanings to them and prioritise them in unique ways. We subsequently generated new codes, informed by themes emergent from the data. For example, the node ‘concerns with self-worth’ had several sub-nodes, including ‘dignity’, ‘family’, ‘attitudes to disability’, ‘having purpose in life’ and ‘making a difference’ that the three entrepreneurs reported as important to them. We now turn to presenting the study findings.

**Commitment to venture creation and the emergence of entrepreneurial identity**

Entrepreneurial identity presupposes an agent motivated to pursue new venture creation and committed to doing so. The *capacity to commit* to venture creation is not the only causal power that makes entrepreneurial identity possible – agents must also be able to conceive of a novel product idea and to acquire legitimacy with important business stakeholders – but commitment *is* necessary for entrepreneurial identity to emerge. Without commitment, entrepreneurial identity cannot emerge. This section elaborates on how entrepreneurs’ consideration of, and commitment to, venture creation was shaped by their concerns in relation to *all* three orders – natural, practical and social. We focus on the onset of impairment or a long-term health condition as an event generating internal conversation, although of course disability was not the only influence on identity formation.

*Concerns in the three orders and consideration to pursue venture creation*

Embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions, can *both* enable and constrain human capacities to act in the world, with consequences for personal concerns in *all* three orders – natural, practical and social. This section elucidates how entrepreneurs’ concerns with well-being, performative achievement and self-worth have shaped consideration of venture creation.

*Concerns with physical well-being*. Personal concerns with well-being in the natural order can encourage agents to consider an entrepreneurial role. Mobility difficulties, for instance, may prompt people to re-evaluate whether to stay in employment or to pursue alternative ways of working. Each participant reported concerns with physical well-being, such as coping with pain, fatigue, mobility difficulties and the unpredictable effects of impairment. Interviews with Sarah, Garry and David illustrate how the impairment or health condition constraints they face prompted them to consider career change and venture creation. Sarah’s degenerative condition forced her to close her previous training business; Garry had to abandon his football career, and later a job in the army, due to ill health; and David left an employed management position following the onset of impairment.

“[I am][[1]](#footnote-1) unable to sit for more than a few minutes, walking is very difficult, I tend to spend 22 hours a day laying flat. … And so I couldn’t continue with that career anymore.” [Sarah]

“The problem I’ve got really is the transplant failing because if I go back on dialysis I’m going to be very ill again…I’ve been ill for most of my life. …I was in hospital all of my twenties, all of my thirties. But the upside is this, [the business] has come out of it all.” [Garry]

“The worst thing is the fatigue. I mean the morphine makes me tired, and the pain. If those things were out of the way, that would be great really. … So, I think there was a real sort of issue, and then I made a decision that I really couldn’t do that anymore. I literally couldn’t work like that.” [David]

Concerns with well-being not only influenced participants’ working practices but also generated reflections on their various other concerns in relation to well-being. Consideration of new venture creation arose as each decided they could not continue in their careers. Although our specific focus is on the onset of impairment or ill-health, concerns with physical well-being extend beyond problems to body function or structure. All entrepreneurs, for instance, must avoid bodily harm by eating a nutritious diet, taking sufficient rest and sleep, and protecting themselves from natural elements, such as fire, to maintain well-being.

*Concerns with performative achievement*. Personal concerns with performative achievement in the practical order, pertaining to task ease or difficulty, can influence consideration to create a new venture. Entrepreneurs use various human-made artefacts in conducting their businesses, including cars, information and communications devices and office spaces that facilitate day-to-day activities. The material culture of artefacts can enable as well as constrain venture creation, depending on circumstances. Participants faced specific challenges in relation to the material culture. Sarah’s spinal condition restricts her from sitting for long periods of time. Many organisational settings are, therefore, unsuitable in terms of her capacity to perform tasks others take for granted, such as sitting at a desk. Sarah, however, could overcome some of these material challenges by creating an online business with the help of assistive and digital technologies. Garry’s hearing impairment has consequences for his ability to use a telephone and to communicate effectively with business stakeholders. This was remedied, to a degree, by employing a support worker. David highlighted how new technologies, such as the iPad, enable him to be an artist despite physical limitations painting in a traditional way.

“With the rise of technology, there is so much more that you can do now online and [with] social media and Skype. I couldn’t have done this job 10 years ago because the technology wouldn’t have existed.” [Sarah]

“The daily biggest issue I have is my hearing. The telephone is a nightmare. My deaf assistant, support worker, she drives me, she takes me to meetings, and she’s always there to interpret.” [Garry]

“Using an iPad was suited for me because, obviously, I couldn’t work anywhere…I’m always painting, but the great thing is, I can rest when I want. I feel very tired so I have longevity of being able to keep going for longer periods.” [David]

Interactions with the material culture of human-made artefacts can both enable and constrain working practices and generate consideration of venture creation. The emergence of entrepreneurial identity would likely have been impossible for the three entrepreneurs without the help of artefacts and technologies, or support from others. Access to the material culture of artefacts enabled them not only to get back into work, or transition into a more suitable work role, but also to become a *particular* kind of entrepreneur: for instance, one who runs an online business or who creates art using digital technologies.

*Concerns with self-worth*. Personal concerns with self-worth in the social order can crucially influence individual consideration to create a new venture. Judgements of approval or disapproval associated with social norms are linked to one’s sense of worth as a person valuable to others. Social relations are central to the constructionist notion of entrepreneurial identity, yet studies confine their interest to narrative practices rather than the concerns that generate such practices. The three entrepreneurs sought to create a venture as a way of realising their concerns pertaining to their social standing. Sarah’s prior experience in diversity training has been an impetus for creating a social enterprise. Garry’s extreme experience of ill-health prompted him to create a fitness training service to support people with injuries and impairments. David re-evaluated his career in the corporate sector to eventually become an artist working with young people.

“I need a purpose. I need to feel as though I’m doing something worthwhile…So [the business] is giving me the flexibility to run it from my bed.” [Sarah]

“My life’s got to be worthwhile. I’ve got to help people around the world, and I can with this [business]...So I had my transplant and that was when I broke free. So I started my own business.” [Garry]

“What I’m trying to do is to create the business environment that has conscience whilst looking after myself…I’m a great believer that you can kind of give something back.” [David]

This section has illustrated that there is a necessary relation between personal embodied properties, concerns, and the pursuit of an entrepreneurial role. Participants’ concerns with physical well-being necessarily shaped their consideration of venture creation as a way of accommodating working life around specific impairments and health conditions. Concerns with performative achievement influenced the sought-after entrepreneurial roles that, they believed, could be performed within the constraints and affordances of the material culture of artefacts. Finally, concerns with self-worth shaped the consideration of venture creation as a vehicle for realising what matters to them most in relation to others.

*Internal conversation, emotional elaboration and commitment to venture creation*

The onset of impairment, or a long-term health condition, can generate internal conversation by eliciting strong first-order emotions, such as anger, frustration or self-pity. Fuelled by these emotions, agents subsequently undergo emotional elaboration resulting in the second-order prioritisation of emotions that leads to commitment. Emotional elaboration drives internal conversations and helps us to prioritise our concerns and commit to particular social roles. Sarah, Garry and David all experienced internal conversations before arriving at a decision to commit to venture creation. We explicate their emotional elaborations over time utilising Archer’s (2000) three moments of internal conversation: discernment, deliberation and dedication. The three moments are indicative of three stages of the entrepreneurial motivation-behaviour continuum. We conceptualise these as *concerns* (discernment) or what we care about, *consideration* of venture creation (deliberation) as a way of prioritising some concerns over others, and *commitment* (dedication) to venture creation.

*Discernment*. At this preliminary stage, we review what we care about (Archer, 2000). The onset of impairment has had a significant impact on participants’ well-being, eliciting strong first-order emotions, such as frustration or self-pity. Entrepreneurs reflected primarily on how disability powerfully disrupted their activities and relationships, reminiscent of Haynie and Shepherd’s (2011) emotion-focused coping strategy aimed at alleviating distress. Sarah, Garry and David had to review their concerns with well-being and come to terms with a ‘newly’ embodied sense of self.

“All I could think about was, ‘I can’t do this, I can’t sit at a desk, I can’t go and see clients, I can’t go to networking events’, and my whole brain seemed to be taken up with all of the things that I can’t do now that I used to do before.” [Sarah]

“The way I was on dialysis, I was very, very ill. I was married with children. My marriage fell apart. Everything fell apart. My life, it was a nightmare for 12 years. When you have everything stripped away, it doesn’t matter you’ve got attitudes and everything when you’re ill. It doesn’t matter that you rage against it. You’re ill. And that’s it. You’re not going anywhere. There’s nothing you can do about it. Your body fails.” [Garry]

“I was very ill at the time and literally spent a lot of time in bed, feeling quite sorry for myself. I was testing new drugs all the time, drugs would make me sick, I’d be vomiting before I went to work and sometimes at work.” [David]

*Deliberation*. At the second stage of internal conversation, we question the worth of our various concerns and how much we care about them (Archer, 2000). Having come to terms with a newly embodied sense of self, participants then started to question how to balance their concerns with well-being around their concerns with performative achievement and self-worth. This is when they start considering venture creation as a way of fitting their specific impairment effects around working life. Again, Haynie and Shepherd’s (2011) problem-focused coping strategy, aimed at addressing the underlying problem, is evocative of Sarah’s, Garry’s and David’s moments of deliberation.

 “So, then, I had to get angry with myself really, and start thinking ‘Ok, I can spend all the year talking about what I can’t do anymore, but who is that gonna help? And how is that gonna be productive? Ok, it’s different, it’s worse, it’s different, it’s not what I have chosen, it is what it is. So what can I do with this? I can’t do 90 per cent of the things I used to be able to do, but I can still do things that are of value to people.’” [Sarah]

“When you’re in the deepest, darkest hole you could ever think you could be in, covered in all kinds of crap, if you like, what do you do? There’s only two ways you can go. You go up and fight back, or you go under. So you fight back. I tried everything. It didn’t work. I was ill and I couldn’t stop it, right? So I had to accept it, but fought against it inside. A lot of turmoil in my life as well. 12 years on dialysis, I didn’t like it, but you start to understand what matters.” [Garry]

“It was near to Christmas and I just couldn’t see a future. And I thought ‘There is another way to this and it’s not getting a job in a traditional sense, it’s striking out what is it that I do, that I do better than anybody.’” [David]

*Dedication*. The final stage of internal conversation is when a strict personal identity with its unique pattern of commitments is fully formed (Archer, 2000). Having deliberated over concerns with well-being and working life, this is the moment when Sarah, Garry and David commit to venture creation by acting on their concerns. While at the discernment and deliberation phases the three entrepreneurs mulled over their various concerns, at the stage of dedication they arrived at a particular balance that they can live with and committed themselves to a course of action. These commitments are what makes them a unique person, and a particular kind of entrepreneur.

“Now I’m not that person regretting, I still have moments about it [disability] of course, everybody does, but you know I’m concentrating now on the here and now. So you know, the focus will be ‘Oh I need to phone [a client] this afternoon to find out if they’re going to put any more adverts on.’” [Sarah]

“All of my attitudes and egos went. I’m just doing what I do. I’ve been in a dark place and I’ve learned from being there. Now I could’ve died. So I really had the full hit, if you like. So I shouldn’t be here, but it made me, instead of killing me it made me stronger. And that’s why I’m so passionate about making this [business] work, because it’s about my life. I understand what matters. And what matters more than anything is, you have control of your own life.” [Garry]

“In some ways, it’s [disability] the best thing really that happened to me because you gotten off climbing that [corporate] ladder, thinking ‘how cool I look in that shirt and tie’, to kind of, ‘look at what’s important.’ …I think for me it’s been the best thing ever [starting a business]. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I sometime wake up in the middle of the night thinking ‘What am I doing?’ But it’s like you’ve been programmed, that you should do that.” [David]

This section has highlighted three points. First, the onset of impairment or a long-term health condition, as harm to the body, can elicit strong first-order emotions, such as frustration or self-pity. Second, these emotions emergent from relations with the natural order exist independently of the practical and social orders, although they exert influence on personal concerns in *all* three orders. Third, reflection on the three sets of concerns, consideration of venture creation as a way of prioritising some concerns over others, and commitment to venture creation are three stages of the internal conversation in the transition from entrepreneurial motivation to behaviour. It is at the stage of dedication that participants accomplished a livable balance and committed themselves to pursuing venture creation. Yet, there is a sense of a continuing internal conversation reflected in their commentaries. Sarah still has moments of regret about things she can no longer do, and David sometimes questions his decision to become self-employed. Garry, on the other hand, has made an unconditional commitment to his new venture.

**Conclusion and implications**

This paper has sought to present a critical realist-informed (Archer, 2000, 2003; Bhaskar, 2008; Marks and O’Mahoney, 2014; Smith, 2010) conceptualisation of entrepreneurial identity, as a lens for theorising the connection between motivation, context and venture creation. Our conceptualisation is informed by two key features of realist ontology. First, we have theorised entrepreneurial identity as a causal power that exists independently of its narrative expression by entrepreneurs, or its conceptualisation by researchers. Second, we have utilised a stratified and emergent ontology to distinguish multiple identity levels as distinct causal powers of persons, and multiple orders of reality as analytically distinct external conditions with powers to enable and constrain identity formation. We have drawn on in-depth, qualitative interview data from three UK-based disabled entrepreneurs to demonstrate the value of our conceptual framework. The framework, however, is intended to be applicable to *all* entrepreneurs, whatever their embodied properties and powers.

We have conceptualised entrepreneurial identity as a particular kind of causal power: a personal power to create a new venture. As a causal power (Bhaskar, 2008), entrepreneurial identity is a potentiality or a tendency, rather than a fixed characteristic determining behaviour (Chen et al., 1998), or a dynamic and fluid process (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) enacted through narrative and discursive practices (Anderson and Warren, 2011). Causal powers may be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealised or realised unperceived (Bhaskar, 2008). Although most people have the power to become an entrepreneur not everyone can, or is motivated to, realise that potential. This is because of other countervailing powers, personal, material and socio-cultural, that constrain or discourage, action.

Utilising a stratified and emergent ontology of identity (Archer, 2000; Marks and O’Mahoney, 2014; Smith, 2010), we have contextualised entrepreneurial identity within three analytical orders: the natural, practical and social. We have distinguished two identity strata: personal identity, the set of concerns in the three orders that makes each of us a unique person; and social identity, the public role(s) that we invest ourselves in and commit to in society. Although entrepreneurial identity is a type of social identity, the underlying capacities and concerns that make its emergence possible cannot be reduced to social interaction alone. Our personal concerns are of course embodied, emergent from our variable powers and liabilities, such as particular impairments and health conditions, that shape what we care about and motivate the roles and relationships we commit to in society.

The concept of internal conversation (Archer, 2000) has been used to theorise the connection between entrepreneurial motivation, the natural, practical and social contexts, and venture creation in terms of three stages: reflecting on personal concerns in the three orders (discernment); considering venture creation as a way of prioritising some concerns over others (deliberation); and committing oneself to an entrepreneurial role (dedication). It is only at the stage of dedication that, having mulled over their various concerns, and having considered venture creation, our study participants acted on those concerns that matter to them most to become a *particular* kind of entrepreneur.

The paper has several theoretical implications that might inform future research on entrepreneurial identity. First, to explain the conditions that make the emergence and formation of entrepreneurial identity possible, researchers must explicitly theorise entrepreneurs’ relations with nature and the material culture of artefacts *as well as* relations with the propositional culture of discourses. The powers of nature and material culture both enable and constrain, motivate and discourage, venture creation. Agents may personify entrepreneurial roles in very different ways contingent upon their particular concerns in the three orders. While most entrepreneurial identity studies focus primarily on social relations, some assume, at least implicitly, that entrepreneurs have some concern in relation to nature. For instance, studies in the area of environmental entrepreneurship highlight the pursuit of activities for ecological benefit (e.g. York et al., 2016).

Second, to fully explain entrepreneurial motivation and behaviour, researchers cannot ignore personal embodied properties, such as particular impairments and health conditions. Constructionist studies under-theorise such personal powers, although they implicitly assume that agents must possess at least some powers to resist dominant enterprise discourses (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015). All entrepreneurs are uniquely embodied and their particular embodiment has variable implications for their concerns in the three orders, the consideration of venture creation, and the capacity to commit to an entrepreneurial role. Our framework challenges the simplicity of the disabled / non-disabled binary and theorises entrepreneurs as an heterogeneous group in terms of embodied properties, powers and liabilities.

Third, our novel conceptualisation of entrepreneurial identity explicates the linkages between motivation, context and venture creation, contributing to recent debates on the entrepreneurial intention-behaviour link (e.g. Adam and Fayolle, 2016; Kolvereid, 2016). The constructionist literature tends to under-theorise these links, or implicitly assumes them. Studies that do theorise influences on entrepreneurial behaviour restrict their focus to motivations that arise from how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others (Alsos et al., 2016; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). We have drawn attention to three stages of internal conversation (Archer, 2000) to explain the transition from entrepreneurial motivation to behaviour: discernment (reflecting on concerns in the three orders); deliberation (considering venture creation) and dedication (commitment to an entrepreneurial role). We have shown that the onset of impairment or a long-term health condition can stimulate agential motivation to pursue venture creation and fuel the capacity to commit to an entrepreneurial role.

Our focus on just three entrepreneurs with particular impairments and health conditions has enabled us to conduct an in-depth analysis of identity formation over time. All entrepreneurs, however, are uniquely embodied and their particular embodied properties may generate different concerns with well-being, performative achievement and self-worth, with implications for entrepreneurial motivation and the type of venture created. Future studies could examine more explicitly how different embodied powers of persons shape the three sets of concerns in nature, the material culture and society in different ways, and motivate business exit as well as venture creation. Deeper examination of processes involved in balancing, prioritising and subordinating various concerns could offer new insights into how entrepreneurs resolve or reconcile conflicting concerns.

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1. Text in square brackets added to retain the sense of quotation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)