

# Who are you Calling Old?: Revisiting Notions of Age and Ability Amongst Older Entrepreneurs

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** This paper examines the influence of older entrepreneurs' (50+) social and familial environment on firm formation. In particular, it focuses on both "positive" and "negative" perceptions of age and older entrepreneurship.

**Prior Work:** It has been argued that older entrepreneurship can be used to prolong the working lives of older people and to provide them with financial support in retirement. The recent older entrepreneurship literature suggests that socio-cultural values and norms play a key role in shaping individuals' entrepreneurial propensities. To our knowledge, only one empirical paper has shown that perceived age norms influence entrepreneurial motivations of older individuals. Limited research exists on how the perception of age and social norms regarding entrepreneurship shape the pre-firm formation and continuation of older entrepreneurs.

**Approach:** This paper critically examines literatures on the perceptions of social norms and how these views potentially affect older entrepreneurs. Particularly, the paper explores how older entrepreneurship is viewed as a 'deviant' activity, by drawing upon theories of deviance from sociology, which have been recently adopted in management studies. Furthermore, the paper explores how older individuals do not 'fit' within mainstream discourses of enterprise culture. This paper draws upon primary empirical data from 22 in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with older entrepreneurs in London to explore their experiences of firm formation.

**Results:** The paper presents three key findings. First, it provides new insights into the informal support, and lack of informal support, present in the social networks of older entrepreneurs, which it is argued, creates barriers to older entrepreneurship. Second, it explores how attitudes towards older entrepreneurs are changing, and how it is important that these are adjusted if older people are to continue employment into their later years either full, or part time. Third, the paper explores how the identity of older entrepreneurs and their attitudes to work overcome negative perceptions to older entrepreneurship.

**Implications:** These findings are relevant to economic and social changes in Britain. The government is expecting individuals to extend their working lives, where one option is to encourage older individuals to establish their own firms. This paper provides insights into how older entrepreneurs face social barriers, from the negative perceptions of older entrepreneurship, within their social milieus. We also suggest how these negative perceptions may be mediated, to promote older entrepreneurship.

**Value:** In examining the perceptions of attitudes to older entrepreneurship and the barriers this can create to firm formation, this paper will provide novel insights for policy-makers, business owners, prospective older entrepreneurs and support organisations.

## 1. Introduction

In 2011 the British government began the removal of the Default Retirement Age (DRA) from legislation, which meant that individuals aged 65 years old and over could no-longer be made redundant by their employers, on the basis of their age alone (BIS 2011). This has been heralded as a substantial step towards ending age discrimination, although it has raised questions as to whether older workers want to, or are necessarily able, to work in particular occupations beyond the age of 65. This has become a significant issue for many advanced economies as individuals are living longer, which has exposed governments to increased fiscal pressures in providing pensions for longer whilst they experience a shrinking tax base to support aging cohorts of the population (OECD 2006). In the British context, the inability of individuals to save for retirement has further undermined their capacity to retire to a satisfactory standard of living, where many people will have to work for longer, prior to retirement (Langley 2006).

Academics and policy-makers have suggested that one potential solution to address these issues is to turn towards the promotion of older entrepreneurship, where individuals aged 50 or above, establish their own enterprise to provide them with a flexible option of continuing work (Curran and Blackburn 2001; Weber and Schaper 2004; Kautonen et al. 2008; BIS 2011). The British government has developed an increased interest in the role of older entrepreneurs in the economy. For instance, the development of the Prince's Initiative for Mature Enterprise (PRIME), has sought to promote older entrepreneurship by providing advice and support to older individuals, which are interested in starting their own business. There are several distinct advantages of older entrepreneurship that have been cited within the older entrepreneur literature (Kibler et al. 2011). First, the growth of the older entrepreneur group can address government related issues and fiscal problems, by increasing the tax base and reducing financial dependency (Curran and Blackburn 2001). Second, as older entrepreneurs have comparatively longer working lives than younger individuals, they have cultivated significant human and social capital, that would be lost if it was not reinserted into the economy through self-employment and small businesses (Botham and Graves 2009). Third older entrepreneurship can provide additional income to older individuals who wish to supplement their pensions, or who have been unable to develop an adequate pension (Weber and Schaper 2004).

The literature on older entrepreneurship is relatively limited, compared to established fields such as family business and firm growth, and has often consisted of larger quantitative studies that have focussed upon the motivations and intentions of older individuals in starting their own businesses (Kibler et al. 2011), with a few notable exceptions that have provided detailed insight through qualitative studies (for example, McKay 2001; Ainsworth and Hardy 2008; Kibler et al. 2011). Consequently, there are a limited series of qualitative understandings into the barriers faced by older individuals at different stages of the firm formation process which could provide much needed insight into how to promote the development of new enterprises, through targeted support.

Against this backdrop, an area which has also remained largely unexplored in entrepreneurship research is the impact of local communities and social milieus on older (potential) entrepreneurs (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson 2007). In the context of older entrepreneurship research, there is only one quantitative study by Kautonen et al. (2009), which focuses upon the local and social communities' influence on older, potential entrepreneurs. This is important as transactional studies of entrepreneurs tend to isolate them from their social contexts, which hides the importance of support in the early stages of venture formation (Clarke and Holt 2010). The ability of older entrepreneurs to gain support from friends and family appears to be problematic, as older individuals can, in some contexts be viewed as people that should not risk resources in venture formation at this stage of their lifecycle, a consequence of being subjected to ageism through public and popular discourses (see Ainsworth and Hardy 2008; 2009). Subsequently, older entrepreneurship entry can be limited, or enabled by their social contexts, which we argue can be viewed as 'deviant' behaviour.

The notion of entrepreneurial activity as (both positive or negative) deviant behaviour emerged from debates in economics (Schumpeter 1934), sociology (Spitzer 1975) and psychology (Chell 1985), and as a consequence of the interdisciplinary roots of entrepreneurship research, the term has slowly entered and pervaded academic studies (Tomczyk and Ross 2011). Early studies of small business and entrepreneurship have focussed upon the characteristics of entrepreneurs, and what traits and characteristics make them different to other individuals in

employment (Tomczyk and Ross 2011). The different actions and characteristics of entrepreneurs have often been referred to as deviant behaviour (for example, Chell 1985; Goss 2005; Ainsworth and Hardy 2008), that depart from normal behaviour and social expectations in society (Meek et al. 2010) that can often be found in popular discourses of enterprise (Down and Warren 2008). Whilst entrepreneurship research has suggested that entrepreneurs deviate from a meta-narrative of social norms within society, where they undertake low-risk employment that is perceived to be stable, more recent research has suggested that deviance occurs in particular social contexts (Goss 2005).

Contemporary research in entrepreneurship has begun to develop more nuanced studies of the identities of entrepreneurs, which have provided new insight into what makes particular groups of individuals deviant, or different. This paper seeks to build upon these debates by providing new insight into the development of new ventures by older entrepreneurs, by focussing on how this group is often viewed as being deviant to society, and/or to their immediate social networks of friends and family and how this can potentially develop barriers to venture formation. This is important as older entrepreneurs may be constrained from developing their own enterprise, by being shut away from vital resources or support which are often provided by family and friends (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson 2007).

Based on an analysis of the older entrepreneurship literature, several gaps emerge that this paper seeks to address through the following three objectives. First, we seek to build upon the quantitative study Kautonen et al. (2009), which examines age norms specific to older entrepreneurship, and their effects on the entrepreneurial intentions of older individuals. We seek to provide a more nuanced narrative into how older entrepreneurs are embedded within their own communities and social milieus, and what is viewed as 'normal' behaviour in these contexts (Down and Warren 2008). Second, the paper seeks to examine what forms of support are, or are not, given to older entrepreneurs during their firm start-ups by friends and family. This will provide insight into how these individuals are often reliant on the resources and support of others, when attempting to develop an enterprise, which highlights how being classed as a deviant, can undermine the firm formation process. Third, the paper provides a nuanced view on how these individuals are viewed as deviants that struggle to fit within popular 'discourses of enterprise' and other social norms, which are prevalent within society and their social milieu. In doing so, we investigate how the nascent older entrepreneurs embrace, or reject, social norms in the formation of their own enterprises, and how in turn they are accepted or rejected as deviants by friends and family.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows: Section two will explain the research design and the methodology used in the study. The third section will then explore the academic literature that concerns older entrepreneurs, including the theoretical concepts of deviance that will be used to frame the analysis within the paper. Section four will examine the ways in which older entrepreneurs view their identity as deviant individuals, or not, and how it affects the formation of their business ventures. The fifth section investigates the diverse responses of family and friends to older entrepreneurs. It uncovers how deviant behaviour is embraced and praised, or rejected and shunned, by different groups and how these pressures are negotiated by nascent entrepreneurs. The final section will conclude the paper.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper is based on a review of academic, grey literatures and qualitative data, collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews that were conducted between 2010 and 2011. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. The individuals were older entrepreneurs (n=22), aged 50 years and older, in accordance with the accepted British definition of older entrepreneurs (PRIME 2010). A database supplied by PRIME was used to provide contact details for older entrepreneurs based in London. These respondents differed by age, gender, and work experience. London was chosen as the study area as it has a diverse market and a wide range of communities that provided a rich selection of cases to explore the role of family and friend-based support in the formation of new ventures. The interviewees were asked questions which explored their motivations to develop a firm, barriers to firm formation and the sources of formal and informal support that were used during the nascent firm stage. Once permission was granted by the respondents, the interviews were recorded on dictaphones, before being transcribed in full. Central themes for the analysis were developed from the literature and research questions, and the transcripts were thematically open-coded (Myers 2008). The

transcripts and any associated respondent data were anonymised to protect the identities of these individuals.

### **3. The 'Ins and Outs' of older entrepreneurship and deviant behaviour**

Despite the growing importance of older entrepreneurship, and its potential to address contemporary social and economic issues, the development of academic literature on the subject has been relatively slow and sporadic, when compared to more established research areas such as family business and firm growth. The existing literature is geographically and thematically diverse, and addresses a variety of study areas. A recent desktop literature review by Kibler et al. (2011) shows that these areas include entrepreneurial predispositions and motives, human, financial and social capital, female entrepreneurship and older entrepreneurial identities, enterprise policy and support, and the informal institutional and cultural environment.

In this paper we turn specifically to further understandings on the predispositions and motives of potential older entrepreneurs, and how they are affected in their start-up process by the views and social norms of their social and cultural context(s). The older entrepreneurship literature on entrepreneurial preferences acknowledges that older individuals are less willing to enter self-employment (van Praag and van Ophem 1995; Curran and Blackburn 2001; Singh and DeNoble 2003). For example, this reduced willingness can be attributed to the age effect in entrepreneurship with the opportunity cost of time (Lévesque and Minniti 2006) and potentially increasing health concerns (Curran and Blackburn 2001). Moreover, the reticence of individuals to enter self-employment, through a combination of push and pull factors, have motivated older individuals into venture formation, through redundancy, or the prospects of greater independence and flexibility (Kibler et al. 2011). Despite these important insights, limited (qualitative) research exists on the positive and negative influences of the cultural and social settings within which older entrepreneurs are embedded. This is despite the recognition of the importance of support networks and role models in older entrepreneurship (Baucus and Human 1994; Down and Ainsworth 2008), where informal institutional contexts can shape firm formation processes (McKay 2001; Weber and Schaper 2004; Kautonen et al. 2008). Moreover, research on individuals and their intentions to develop enterprises - as older entrepreneurs - have suggested that social norms have a significant effect on entrepreneurial intentions, which is affected by assistance and support from friends and family (Kautonen et al. 2009).

#### *Defining what is 'normal' about social norms*

The entrepreneurship literature suggests that enterprising activity is as much influenced by individual attributes as it is by social norms (Baumol and Strom 2007; Thornton et al. 2011; Welter and Smallbone 2011). Social norms, in this context, are an accepted collective of traditions, rituals, values and understandings that are held and enforced between individuals within a community, which also constrain and affect individuals' behaviour by prescribing common understandings as to what behaviour is appropriate in a particular social setting (Giddens 1994; Scott 1995). Social norms can be further seen as unwritten rules of the conduct of a group (Elster 1989), which Meek et al. (2009) define as the decentralised institutions, which are organised by social groups, and are important as they configure their social systems, conventions and discourses (Lounsbury and Crumley 2007), around the shared beliefs of an environment. Due to an individual's embeddedness in such social and normative contexts, their preferences and actions are (in)directly affected through the prevalent social norms of acceptability, morality or ethics (Scott 1995). For instance, Shane (2003) suggests that social norms influence the degree of the desire to become an entrepreneur, whilst they can support or undermine the enterprising potential and activity. The emotional sanctions can also affect how people respond, and limit peoples' attempts to thwart collective norms (Meek et al. 2009), which can act as a disincentive to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour. Of particular interest to this study is the notion of age norms towards entrepreneurial behaviour, which are considered to be particular responses and actions towards those of a particular age (Lawrence 1988; Kautonen et al. 2009). In the context of this study, the age norms within a community can suggest that older individuals with intentions to start an enterprise should not, as it is not viewed as a 'normal' activity for older individuals (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008).

Tomczyk and Ross (2011) note how entrepreneurship research has frequently highlighted how entrepreneurs are different to other individuals, in effect deviants. For example, Goss' (2005) reading of Schumpeter's (1934) earlier work outlines how entrepreneurs rupture existing modes of

economic production, through innovation creating new opportunities through 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1934), and in turn, produce new markets and modes of economic production. This theme has permeated studies on entrepreneurship, where earlier investigations focussed on uncovering the character traits of entrepreneurs, and what made these individuals different to other employees and managers (Smilor 1997), effectively marking entrepreneurs as social deviants who reject social norms. Studies have illustrated how particular ecologies of entrepreneurs are deviants, such as the portrait by Kets de Vries (1977) on entrepreneurs with sociality disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite the broad and popular discourses of entrepreneurship, where entrepreneurs constantly take risks and innovate, there are no set characteristics or traits that universally apply across all entrepreneurs (Smilor 1997). Following this argument, Meek et al. (2009) have stressed the importance of the context of social norms, by which deviants are judged, as entrepreneurial behaviour and activities vary across different cultures and spatial levels (see, for instance, Mueller and Thomas 2000; Lundström and Stevenson 2005; Begley et al, 2005; Tamásy 2006). Furthermore, Liñán et al. (2011) show that the degree of the perceived social acceptance in a local environment shapes an individual's intent to become an entrepreneur. Within the specific context of this study, Kautonen et al. (2009) have suggested that the age norms prevalent in a regional community that are supportive towards enterprising activities at an older age, together with positive appraisals by friends and family, can encourage the intentions of older enterprise development.

We argue in this paper that in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of social norms, and how they – positively or negatively – affect older entrepreneurs in enterprise development, it is necessary to develop insights into how (ab)normal behaviour is observed, and in turn how deviant behaviour is practiced. In other words, we seek to add further understandings to the older entrepreneurship research field by looking at older potential entrepreneurs in light of their conforming, but particularly non-conforming behaviour towards certain social norms. Underlying the importance of such a qualitative analysis, Meek et al. (2009) suggests that while individuals can conform to established norms in their social reference group, they can also reject certain social norms, without excluding themselves from that social system. Consequently, an older individual's social system can affect their entrepreneurial preferences and actions in different ways. In order to achieve this, we particularly turn to review sociological theorisations of deviance, where social norms are rejected by individuals. This frame can be used to analyse how older individuals not only follow, but also reject social norms through deviant behaviour, or struggle to reject these norms during the firm formation process. Debates surrounding the theorisation of deviance have emerged over several decades from sociology that have often focussed on social problems, including theft, prostitution and alcoholism (Spitzer 1975).

#### *Deviation within the social theories of deviance*

Debates about deviant behaviour in economic activity within management literatures can be viewed through two lenses, *positive* and *negative* deviance, although these two have not usually been united (Warren 2003). Negative deviance has been viewed as the performance of undesirable acts, such as theft and fraud within business (Bennett and Robinson 2000). The case study by Anderson and Smith (2007) highlights that an individual can still act entrepreneurial, for instance by operating as a 'business angel', while rejecting existing social and moral norms. However, the alternative, positive deviance is aligned with Schumpeter's vision of entrepreneurship which involves, whistleblowing, radicalism (Warren 2003), and arguably innovation. Following Warren's argument, older entrepreneurs could be engaged in positive and negative deviance, as while they (are perceived to) derive the benefits from enterprise formation (Weber and Schaper 2004) and potentially support the economy through their human and social capital (Singh and DeNoble 2003), some sections of the closer social environment, and society more broadly, view firm formation at an older age as a deviant activity (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008).

The conceptualisation of deviance, can be broadly divided into two categories: First, is the *labelling* of deviant groups who depart from social norms and standards (Becker 1963; Warren 2003). In the context of this study, older entrepreneurs can be labelled as positive or negative deviants within their social milieu, in particular, by family and friends, which will be explored later in the paper. The second approach focuses upon the *behaviour and practice* of deviance, where the process of firm formation by older individuals could be viewed as positively or negatively deviant. Earlier work by Merton (1949) views deviance as the emergence of a divide between society's goals and the means of achieving those goals. For example, obtaining wealth can be accomplished through work, or theft. Merton's research has focused mainly upon negative

deviance although, if we are to move towards a useful understanding of deviance, and its framing of older entrepreneurship, this raises two important questions: Who are entrepreneurs deviant to, by comparison; and who decides that these individuals are deviant?

Moreover, deviance is understood as a relative social construct, where deviance from 'agreed' norms is compared against a reference group (Warren 2003), which family and friends may use as themselves, as we shall demonstrate later. The informal work practices, as codes of conduct, are associated with moving away from a reference group. As older entrepreneurship is a relatively new form of economic activity from the view of policy-makers, it arguably deviates from 'normal' activity in an older individual's lifecycle, where they have historically worked, until they reached their (early) retirement age. Subsequently, older entrepreneurship can be perceived as a deviant, and potentially negative, act in society, as illustrated by Ainsworth and Hardy (2008). We argue in our paper that to view older entrepreneurship as a positive or negative deviant activity that departs from societal norms is too simplistic and that there needs to be a renewed focus on the immediate social milieus of these individuals, through their friends and family.

#### *Discourses that embrace older entrepreneurship?*

Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson (2007) have discussed how convenient myths of entrepreneurship have contributed to the under-socialisation of entrepreneurship research, at the expense of investigating the complex social interactions and relations. This leads these authors to argue that this atomised view of entrepreneurs has hampered the development of the field, leading them call for a more embedded, process-based view of entrepreneurial activity that integrates the collective organisation of other social interactions, following the work of Granovetter (1985) on embeddedness. The previous focus on individualistic analyses of entrepreneurs has ignored important external actors, including friends and family, which are central to developing an understanding of the local social environment that may be the best way of understanding entrepreneurial behaviour (Anderson 2000). Whilst the research by Kautonen et al. (2009; 2010) provides useful insights on entrepreneurial intentions of older individuals by suggesting that the perceptions of support from friends and family do play an important role, it does not tell us about the differences, qualities and consequences of the influence of family and friends, in the firm formation process. This leads us to argue, that in order to explain how deviant actions are labelled, and how individuals react to such labels in nascent firm formation, we need to look at both an older individual's values (internal) and the various expectations within their different social reference groups (external), by particularly focussing on family and friends.

One way of examining the relationship of older entrepreneurs with their social milieus, and the norms that are exercised in these environments, is to utilise narrative analysis (Ucbasaran et al. 2001; Down 2006; Clarke and Holt 2010). This can highlight how older entrepreneurs are networked to other small businesses, kinship and community ties, where entrepreneurship is a social process (Clarke and Holt 2010; Low and Abrahamson 1997), whilst providing insight into the complexity of these relationships, where the reality of an entrepreneur is constrained and governed by shifting conventions and social habits (Goss 2005). Exploring the social milieu of family and friends will unravel the norms, standards and expectations, by which older entrepreneurs are judged to be positively or negatively deviant, in their business activities, which are shaped by regulatory social roles, or defied through deviant behaviour, where deviants are subject to sanctions including negative emotions and shame (Goss 2005). These norms can be framed as a mode of disciplinary power which people conform to, or deviate from (Foucault 1982; Denegri-Knott 2004). This is exercised through micro-politics, in particular, through coercive tactics and discourses (Foucault 1982), which reproduce norms of behaviour, where people conform to discourses of norms and produce their own social control through 'social productive imagination' (McHoul and Grace 1993:34 in Denegri-Knott 2004). The rejection of these norms and social control is labelled as deviance. Research by Ainsworth and Hardy (2008; 2009) has explored how the 'popular' discourse of entrepreneurship, that focus upon empowerment, competition, innovation and productivity have been absorbed, by society, creating a view of what entrepreneurs are, and how entrepreneurs and business owners should be, which is important as these discourses have powerful implications that prescribe who is able to become an entrepreneur, through social norms (du Gay 1996).

However, it has been argued that there is no single discourse of enterprise and that peoples' workplace identities reflect their social, cultural and economic environments (Cohen and Musson 2000; Down and Reveley 2004). Instead, Cohen and Musson (2000) argue that entrepreneurs re-create their own meanings and identities through their social communities, using markers of difference including age and occupation (Parker 1997). Down and Warren (2008:6)

argue that entrepreneurs are 'skilled cultural operators manipulating perceptions of the entrepreneurial self', providing them with more power in the development of their identity. To achieve this, entrepreneurs develop narratives which use clichés as linguistic devices, to develop and legitimate their own identity (Down and Reveley 2004). This post-structural lens is useful in suggesting how some individuals reject and reshape norms to create positive, deviant identities that are, in their view exempt from social norms and combat the label as being negatively deviant. However, during the early stages of firm formation, and in the context of older entrepreneurs, these individuals are often redefining their identities, and require the support of friends and family, both emotionally, and to gain access to resources. As such, as will be shown later, they are initially subject to particular social norms, and they experience difficulties by being labelled as negative deviants.

For example, Ainsworth and Hardy (2008) suggest that enterprise and age as independent constructs do not complement each other, and that older workers find it difficult to conform to, or to represent themselves as part of 'enterprising culture'. As such, they are deviant to the popular norms of enterprise, within discourse, which reflect social reality, where negative stereotypes can prevent the intentions of nascent entrepreneurs and discriminate against older individuals (Ainsworth and Hardy 2009). The paper will now turn to explore how older entrepreneurs viewed themselves as deviants in the nascent stage, and the effects that this can have on their new ventures.

#### **4. Results: Opting in or opting out - Older entrepreneur views on deviance and society**

According to Ainsworth and Hardy (2008), older entrepreneurs have been viewed negatively within popular discourses of enterprise, in Australia, when starting a venture, which can be viewed as deviant behaviour in the context of prevalent social norms in society. In other words, these individuals did not meet the social norms of what was commonly expected in entrepreneurship, yet they were also violating norms where they should remain in full employment or to fully enter retirement. This section of the paper seeks to explore the perceptions of older entrepreneurs within Britain on how society views older entrepreneurship. The findings suggest that older entrepreneurship is viewed in terms of both 'positive' or 'negative' deviance from social norms, which indicates that conforming to norms may create barriers to an older individual's entrepreneurial intentions and progress in the firm formation process, as they do not view it as being 'normal' behaviour, or a viable option.

The views of older entrepreneurs provided a variety of insight. First of all it has to be noted that the age of older (potential) entrepreneurs plays a role in the way they perceive older entrepreneurship, and its social acceptance in society. The findings show that especially individuals whose age has only just moved into the categorical definition of older entrepreneurship, did not view themselves as older entrepreneurs and did not necessarily view themselves as undertaking deviant behaviour, by departing from popular enterprise discourses and social norms. This insight builds upon the quantitative study by Kautonen et al (2009), which has demonstrated that social norms specific to older entrepreneurship shape entrepreneurial intentions, but that this influence does not significantly differ between 'younger' and 'older' age groups of individuals aged 50 and above. In our study, for 'younger' older (potential) entrepreneurs, their appearance could defy the physical evidence of 'old' age, which would protect them from the negative associations of aging and therefore ageism, which made the issue of deviance a moot issue:

*"I think most people don't know how old you are, and then if you are business-like and professional to your clients or whatever it's irrelevant. I think as a concept they think [older entrepreneurship is] ridiculous, but they don't know that the people with whom they are doing business with are over 50. So it's irrelevant" (Case 8)*

Despite this, older entrepreneurs generally maintained the perception that society upheld the view which regarded older entrepreneurs in a negative light, reflecting the work Ainsworth and Hardy (2008; 2009), and how the characteristics of older individuals do not match those of popular enterprise culture discourses, which they argue has a material impact, as these discourses reflect society and people's actions. The following two respondents highlighted, how they believed that society has the perception that older people should not be involved in any type of economic activity or employment when older, or that these businesses are not to be held with the same respect as the ventures of younger individuals:



*"I don't think that they really support old people. I don't think that they have enough respect of old people. I think that they think that of a certain age you are left alone and just live alone and do nothing anymore and that's it. Take your pension and live on your pension" (Case 3)*

*"They probably think we are mad, because again, they just confront the same publicity and read the same news saying that so many companies fail. So I think society thinks it is a bit crazy. And I think also they probably think that we are just doing this for little money and not for serious living money. We just play at it. And [that] certainly isn't gonna be my intention" (Case 10)*

Following our earlier definitions of deviance, respondents tend to perceive themselves in the eyes of the public as being social deviants through their actions of forming a business. In this sense, these individuals believe that society labels them as social deviants (Warren 2003), as they are rejected from the norms of enterprise culture as due to their age and how they do not fit with the popular vision of the young, risk-taking 'warrior' or 'superman' (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson 2007). Scholars have argued that the social acceptance of entrepreneurship leads to higher levels support toward entrepreneurial activities in a given society (Etzioni, 1987; Shane, 2003), but our findings suggest that this perception of society's views could act as a barrier to older entrepreneurship. However, following Welter and Smallbone (2011), an increase in entrepreneurship at an older age could transform it into an essential part of the society and economy, and subsequently, can create an environment with less negative informal sanctioning mechanisms towards older entrepreneurship.

Building on the distinction between positive and negative deviance, some respondents reported how they believed that their deviant behaviour was positive, and whilst their behaviour of venture formation did not meet social norms, this activity was perceived as to provide wider benefits to the economy and society, whilst addressing political issues:

*"...although being old in official terms because the retirement age is [increasing] and the world is accepting now older people doing things, I suppose that's gonna be a bit of a help for me, although I think the drive that older people work longer is coming from the government...I think society still feels that older people should get retired with the age of 60 or 65 or whatever. I think it's only the government who wants us to do things because of fiscal reasons" (Case 10)*

Although the respondents perceived that society held older entrepreneurship as a mode of negative deviant behaviour, they suggested that society's view was slowly changing, especially as entrepreneurship as a cultural phenomenon is becoming more widely promoted, through both government promotion, and through the popular media. As the benefits of entrepreneurship become more popular and promoted along with business ownership, older entrepreneurship may also become less of a negatively deviant activity, which may provide more support and encouragement to older entrepreneurs as this negatively deviant view changes:

*"I personally think it's positive because there's an awful lot of people now admire the idea of entrepreneurship and you know everyone watches The Apprentice and, you know, all of that sort of thing, but at the same time people are slightly irritated by young, clever dicks. [chuckling]...they think they know everything, they think they're going to run the world and they actually don't know anything at all. So I think there is a sort of quiet respect for the older people doing it because I think most people understand what an older person is trying to do when they set up a business." (Case 13)*

This suggests that whilst older business owners believe that society views older entrepreneurship as a negative form of deviant activity, the findings also indicate that this view is seen to be undergoing a shift towards positive deviance. As social norms continue, this transition may continue, although it may also be a slow process, as social norms are embedded within society, and can be more difficult to change than formal institutional contexts (Welter and Smallbone 2011), such as through regulation. This paper will now turn to provide a more nuanced account of the differing social norms that affect older entrepreneurs within their social settings, and particularly the effect of friends and family on nascent and early firm stage older entrepreneurs.

## **5. Results: Black sheep or spring lambs? - The divergent responses of friends and family to deviant behaviour**

As suggested earlier, older entrepreneurs often view themselves as being deviant to social norms in society, by not seeking full-time employment, or retirement. Furthermore, they also deviate from the popular and ubiquitous visions of entrepreneurship, that have often become transformed into convenient rhetorical and mythical ideologies, which have then become politicised into debates and policy, and frequently showcase the characteristics of younger individuals (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson 2001; Ainsworth and Hardy 2008). As we have seen, being viewed as deviant in economic and societal activities can be problematic, and may act, to a certain extent, as a barrier to older entrepreneurs, at the nascent and early firm stages. However, being labelled as a deviant within the closer social environment may entrench stronger and more direct barriers to older entrepreneurship. Hence, drawing on the work of Clarke and Holt (2010) in focussing upon the importance of the social and familial ties of entrepreneurs, we seek to explore the perceptions that older entrepreneurs have regarding the views of their family and friends, and how these networks consider the older entrepreneur's behaviour to be deviant, and how this affects the support that they extend.

The findings indicate that the support for older entrepreneurs from their social milieu varies, based on the experiences and norms that are operated within the social or familial groups. Based on the close ties and trust that these entrepreneurs have with friends and family, they often sought support, if not necessarily technical and practical advice, from friends and family, which was important during venture formation:

*"...I think [the emotional support] was important, if everybody would have told me it was crazy I probably would have thoughts, am I the only one who thinks this is a good idea? and just give up, maybe. So yes the emotional support of my friends was really important" (Case 10)*

Individuals that viewed themselves as negative social deviants within society, who were departing from commonly recognised social norms, or that required an increase in self-confidence before embarking upon older entrepreneurship, found external support from social reference groups to be fundamental. Gaining approval from individuals that they trusted, when potentially violating societal norms, or to ascertain that this deviant behaviour was viewed as positively deviancy also became important, as the following quote illustrates:

*"It just felt like I needed someone to say "Yes, it's okay. You're allowed to do it." (Case 19)*

This finding generally supports recent quantitative studies that apply Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour in the context of older entrepreneurship (Kautonen et al. 2009; 2010), showing that the more support an older individual receives from family and friends, the higher their intention is to go ahead and start a business. Moreover, when family members perceived firm formation to be a mode of positive deviance, support would often be forthcoming. It emerged that family members that had been involved in self-employment and had positive experiences in business, view this activity as being more 'normal' and provided older entrepreneurs with both emotional support and professional advice. The belief that older entrepreneurs were engaged in positive deviant behaviour within their social reference groups, also witnessed the release of financial resources:

*"My children did support me a lot. My oldest son works for himself, he has never worked for anybody. From the age of 18, when he left school, he said mummy I am working for myself and there is no need for me to go to university. I beg him. But he said look the time I spent in university three years, I come out and do the same. I don't need to go to university to do it. With the age of 22 he bought his own flat... It's very natural for me...[he also] gave me some money to buy some stuff" (Case 3)*

In the nascent and early stages, financial and emotional support was also forthcoming from spouses, by providing to financial support to the dependent, older entrepreneur, in addition to providing start-up funds for the business:

*"...my wife is earning quite good money, which we really need as we have children and so on...for sure, without my wife I think it would have been impossible for me to continue" (Case 7).*

In contrast, family members that had experiences of employment within larger organisations, including the public and private sector, had a different experience of working-life and a different set of social norms and expectations. As a consequence they often judged the activities of older entrepreneurs negatively, resulting in the removal of emotional and financial support and in some cases, the active discouragement of nascent older entrepreneurs:

*"The family actually tried to put me off. They said you're in the NHS, it's safe, stay there until you're 90. I suppose that's fear for me, they didn't want to see me fail. So I suppose from that point of view they're worried" (Case 10)*

The relationship between the view of positive and negative deviance, based on the experiences of family members, resonated with the experiences of friends whose personal relationships could also undermine support. Friendship groups, whose lives were characterised by a life of working in corporations, viewed a climb towards senior management positions as normal behaviour, leading them to view older entrepreneurship as negatively deviant behaviour:

*"...a lot of my friends were doing serious career development or getting themselves into organizations, going up the cooperate ladder. And I wasn't doing that, They must have been very disappointed in a way that I didn't become you know a management development consultant or whatever...along that thread I don't fit in" (Case 8)*

Friends in social groups that were not involved in entrepreneurship often utilised markers, as norms to track the conformability or progress of their friends through the trajectory of a professional career, within larger organisations. Rejecting these markers or norms, by voluntarily undertaking self-employment was seen as deviant behaviour from the group norms:

*"I found my friends the least helpful. They always had the ifs and "What about the [company] car?" and "What about your pension?" (Case 17)*

In contrast, individuals that had friends in social groups who had been self-employed viewed self-employment as a normal activity. These social groups viewed the norms of corporate employment, to be deviant to their norms, and provided support to older individuals during their nascent and early firm stages:

*"I've got lots of friends who are self-employed and have had all the way through really...Yes, people are encouraging and almost to the point "Why didn't you do it sooner?"... I think if I had friends who just worked in 9 to 5 jobs I'd feel quite isolated with it" (Case 19)*

Moreover, negative deviance did not always have a negative effect on the aspirations of older individuals as critiques led older individuals to undertake a re-evaluation of business ideas where a lack or withdrawal of support through negative deviance provided positive effects:

*"I don't think it's hindering me, sometimes it makes me kind of questioned, but I think that's good, because it makes me rehearse in my own mind what are the benefits for doing this. So if everybody said yeah that's a good idea go for it, I probably wouldn't have planned so carefully. Because I would think, oh that's gonna be easy," (Case 10)*

Subsequently, support, finance and advice to older entrepreneurs from friends and family is important, particularly in problem solving and to overcome barriers at the nascent and early firm stages. However, this support is contingent on the social norms of family and friends, which are contingent and vary on the personal and work experiences of the social groups in which older entrepreneurs are situated. Such an examination of the social milieu of nascent older entrepreneurs adds to the need of fine-grained insights into the role of work history and older entrepreneurship (Kautonen et al. 2010). Moreover, the findings imply that family and friends can also differ in their social support, which in turn underlies that family and friends are distinctive social reference groups, thus cannot be simplified to one social category as applied in recent quantitative studies on older entrepreneurship (see Kautonen et. al. 2009; 2010). Summing up, this contributes to our understanding on the social influences on older entrepreneurship and the evaluation of deviancy, which in turn helps determine what support is realised.

## 6. Conclusion

Although academics and policy-makers have drawn attention to the potential role that older entrepreneurship can play in the British economy, research in this area remains relatively limited, especially with regard to understandings on the barriers to older entrepreneurship (Kibler et al. 2011). This paper has attempted to examine the older entrepreneurs' perception of social norms towards older entrepreneurship in society and their closer social environment. In particular, the aim was to reveal the positive and negative influences of family and friends on older entrepreneurs at the nascent and early firm stages, which provides insight in to the barriers that emerge from the divergence experiences of these reference groups, and the social norms that they create.

In this paper, we first examined the views of older entrepreneurs as to how they believe they are viewed by society. This uncovered how older entrepreneurs believe that they struggle to fit within what has been called an 'enterprise culture' discourse, which academics have often criticised for focussing on simplistic stereotypes (Drakopoulo-Dodd and Andersen 2004), which obscure the existence of 'other' types of entrepreneurs, beyond those that are young, individualistic risk-takers. Subsequently, these older individuals argued that they did not feel that they conformed to the social norms of enterprising activity, and that they were viewed negatively within society, a view partially reflected through popular discourses of entrepreneurship, mirroring the work of Andersen and Hardy (2008). Despite this, the findings indicated that this view is changing, and there may be a gradual shift from negative deviance to positive deviance in social norms of popular discourse.

This study illustrates that negative perceptions towards older entrepreneurship in society, perceived or real, can negatively affect older potential entrepreneurs. Such prevalent social norms may particularly set barriers to those older individuals that intended to start a business. In other words, they did not take up older entrepreneurship, as they were dissuaded by what they perceived to be negative social norms, which could lead to a lack of support. Kautonen et al. (2009) underlines this view by showing that perceived social norms that disapprove older enterprising activity in a regional context can hinder the formation of an older individual's entrepreneurial intention. In general, this leads us to suggest that the iconic vision of entrepreneurship that is prevalent in contemporary media and government discourses needs to be reengineered (Drakopoulou-Dodd 2007). Subsequently, we propose that policy and support organizations should seek to facilitate a socio-cultural environment through, for instance, local information events and the media (Lundström and Stevenson, 2005) that increases the social acceptance or the perceived positive deviancy of entrepreneurial activities at an older age, and at the same develops new alternative discourses of older entrepreneurship. These discourses are needed in order to make the option of older enterprise appear more socially approved in society, thus more accessible to older individuals.

This paper also sought to move beyond an individualistic analysis of older entrepreneurs, to situate them within their wider social milieu, which provided insight into the strong role that family and friends articulate during the early stages and nascent firm formation of businesses, to support or dissuade individuals in venture formation. The findings indicate that friends and family are important in providing financial support, but also to provide informal business advice, based on the experience of friends and family in entrepreneurship. Subsequently, the norms held within social circles of friends, and family networks are used as reference points to view if older entrepreneurs conform to set behavioural norms, which if violated, can see the withdrawal of support. As older entrepreneurs can be viewed as undertaking deviant activity, emotional support is also important, during the nascent stages of firm formation, which mirrors the work of Goss (2005), who suggests that networks of pride in social groups can label the act of building a business as a positive activity.

Moreover, the findings imply that older entrepreneurs can be viewed as negative deviants in one social reference group, such as family, while being perceived as positive deviants in another social group, such as close friends, and vice versa. This also suggests that if older potential entrepreneurs receive emotional and professional support from one particular individual or reference group, social barriers resulting from society or other social groups can in some cases be overcome. Such conclusions contribute to our knowledge of the role of social milieus in older entrepreneurship as prior quantitative studies (e.g., Kautonen et al. 2009; 2010) have primarily summarized friends and family as one social reference group, with impacts on entrepreneurial

intentions; thus neglecting potential positive and negative influences of both family and friends. Hence, a more detailed view on the varying influence of different social references groups is needed in order to gain a better understanding of social barriers and social support for older entrepreneurs.

In addition to our contributions to debates on older entrepreneurship, this paper has suggested how sociological theories of deviance and the departure from established social norms can be used in small business and entrepreneurship studies as an analytical frame to detect barriers to entrepreneurship research. In this case, when individuals do not comply with the norms, established within their social groups, this can have negative or positive consequences on older individuals, in particular who are considering, or are engaged in developing firms. While including a broader societal perspective on older entrepreneurship, future areas of research particularly need to investigate the roles and actions of friends and family members of older entrepreneurs more closely, by interviewing these actors to uncover networks of support, power and trust relations, experiences and discourses to view how they affect older individuals at the nascent and early firm stages.

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