

(Dis)embodied entrepreneurs, identity and impairment

Eva Kašperová

Context and Aims

'Identity' has become a popular frame through which to investigate a variety of phenomena, revitalizing established areas of organizational research (Alvesson et al 2008). In disciplines such as sociology, disability studies, and sociology of health and illness, scholars increasingly emphasize the role of 'the body' in identity formation.

Using the lens of embodiment, this study aims to explore how entrepreneurs with impairments construct and negotiate their entrepreneurial identity. People with impairments are more likely to become self-employed than population generally, yet little is known about the influence of impairment on entrepreneurial processes and identity formation of entrepreneurs with impairments.

Entrepreneurial identity is conceptualised as:

1. an embodied *and* socially embedded process that involves non-discursive and discursive practices,
2. emergent from engagement in new venture creation and management activities, and
3. reproduced and transformed over time as individuals act in their natural, practical and social contexts.

Methods

- Interviews with entrepreneurs with impairments and their stakeholders, including customers and employees (N= 40)
- Observations (N= 2-5 businesses)

Analysis and Discussion

Most studies of entrepreneurial identity adopt a *strong* social constructionist approach, conceptualizing identity primarily as a linguistic, discursive and relational construct.

This approach is necessarily dualistic, neglecting the role of the body in the formation of identity. Consequently, several assumptions are found in the literature:

- I. Absent presence of the body – the body is implicitly assumed but never theorized explicitly.
- II. Homogeneous bodies – entrepreneurs are treated as an homogeneous group in terms of bodily properties and powers.
- III. Assumed able-bodiedness – entrepreneurs are assumed to be able-bodied as opposed to differently abled individuals.



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Implications

Theorizing entrepreneurship as an embodied and socially embedded process may provide novel insights into the role of the body in entrepreneurial processes and the formation of identity. There are several implications for studying entrepreneurs with impairments:

- Bodily properties and powers necessarily shape entrepreneurial agency.
- Entrepreneurs need to develop capabilities to negotiate their way through the natural, practical and social worlds they inhabit. How they are embodied will influence their entrepreneurial activities.
- Embodied practices are constitutive of entrepreneurial identities, who we are cannot be separated from how we are embodied.
- Impairments vary in origin, type, severity and duration, and are likely to have variable effects on entrepreneurs' motivations and capabilities, affecting decisions for business start-up, growth or exit.
- Visible impairments may affect entrepreneurial legitimacy and, consequently, individual experiences of securing finance, interacting with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

Contact: e.kasperova@kingston.ac.uk