

## ***Bricolage* as survival, growth and transformation: the role of patch-working in the social agency of migrant entrepreneurs**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the patch-working strategies of migrant entrepreneurs as a form of social agency. ‘Patch-working’ - the reliance on supplementary forms of income to support business activity – is often seen as a means of cushioning the financial vulnerability of small firms. However, the mechanisms and forms that patch-working takes tend to be overlooked. Evidence from 42 west Midlands’ firms shows that, despite the highly constrained operating environment, the exercise of social agency can help to cushion against disadvantage and to rework their current conditions through patch-working. This allows for business growth, and even transformational growth in some cases, rather than sheer survival. Even so, our findings show that the agency of migrant entrepreneurs brings about only minor improvements in revenue and is certainly not capable of fundamentally changing either the nature of the sector or the structure of the labour market in which they are embedded.

**Key words:** migration, entrepreneurship, patch-working, *bricolage*, social agency, UK.

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## Introduction

This article examines the patch-working strategies of migrant<sup>i</sup> entrepreneurs in order to shed light on the neglected issue of their social agency. Patch-working (Kibria, 1994) or ‘*bricolage*’ (Baker and Nelson, 2005) refers to attempts by entrepreneurs to pull together diverse resources in order to boost income and protect against fluctuations in the market. Patch-working as a survival strategy is often seen to be necessary because of migrants’ disadvantaged position in the labour market (Ahmad, 2008; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Anderson, 2010; Bloch, 2013; Alberti, 2014; Bernsten, 2016), as well as the effects from the harshly competitive sectors in which they operate (Kloosterman, 2010). These two conditions reinforce each other and contribute to a challenging environment for migrant entrepreneurs.

Patch-working is a relevant research area because it examines the strategies migrant entrepreneurs use to mitigate these harsh conditions. However, the tendency to conflate patch-working with the daily preoccupation of ‘getting by’ (see, for example, Datta *et al.*, 2007) means that the scope for migrant entrepreneurs to exercise social agency is not fully explored. Extant studies ‘emphasize structural constraints rather than variations in the specific agential capacities’ (Vincent *et al.*, 2014: 372) of individual entrepreneurs. Vincent *et al.* (2014) speculate on the notion of ‘transformational’ potential in their call for more considered attention to the social agency of migrant entrepreneurs. This is probably too optimistic: although the UK enterprise regime is lightly regulated, allowing new entrepreneurial minorities to enter the market with comparative ease, that market is often one characterised by disequilibrium, with supply outlets continually in excess of customer potential (Ram *et al.*, 2008; see also Jones *et al.*, 2014). Nonetheless, the call for more focused attention on social agency is important, and has been reinforced in a recent review of migrant entrepreneurship studies (Ram *et al.*, 2016). This paper offers a more grounded approach by stressing the constraints but also the variability of outcomes when looking at the

social agency of migrant entrepreneurs. We examine the approaches to patch-working of 42 interviews with new migrant entrepreneurs in the west Midlands (UK). Patch-working strategies are found to be diverse, and include: pooling resources between household and firm (Kibria, 1994), multiple job-holding (Rajiman, 2001; Datta *et al.*, 2007; McDowell *et al.*, 2009; Anderson, 2010), multiple activities on one site, and managing a portfolio of businesses (Carter and Ram, 2003). The entrepreneurial outcomes of these patch-working strategies are more varied than extant studies suggest. We identify three categories: (i) *survival* where patch-working is actively used as resilience or everyday coping (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010: 216); (ii) *growth* where patch-working facilitates changes in migrants' daily conditions and operations and (iii) *transformational growth*, where patch-working generates substantial business growth and is characterised by forward-looking, projective agency.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal approach helps to illuminate the projective (future orientated), as well as evaluative (immediate), aspects of migrants' social agency. The varied outcomes of migrant patch-working also demonstrate the scope for agency to operate along a continuum rather than a fixed state (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Whether orientated to growth or survival, social agency achieves changes of degree rather than kind, a revelation somewhat at odds with Vincent *et al.*'s (2014) argument for its transformational potential. Hence, we caution against any tendency to see what is for many a struggle for survival as any genuine form of economic empowerment. Our data show that the exercise of agency is highly dependant on the social position of migrant entrepreneurs, where the higher access to resources (financial, human and/or social) results in a greater exercise of projective agency.

Following a review of how patch-working and portfolio strategies have been framed within (migrant) entrepreneurship literature, we present our methods and findings, highlighting contrasts between survival- and growth-oriented patch-working. We conclude by

placing our results in the context of ongoing debates about the role of agency in the strategies of migrant entrepreneurs.

### **Patch-working strategies and the social agency of migrant entrepreneurs**

We focus on new waves of migrants to the UK, who in a sharp break with the earlier pattern originate from a variety of locations throughout the globe and come in a myriad of legal, occupational and social guises, driven by a variety of motives (Vertovec, 2007). One in seven of new firms in the UK are started by migrants (Centre for Entrepreneurs [CFE] and Duedil 2014), and their overall contribution to employment is 1.8 jobs per new entrepreneur (OECD, 2011). The number of migrant firms is likely to be much higher since CFE/Duedil (2014) study does not include enterprises with an annual turnover of less than one million pounds and most migrant businesses have much lower turnovers (Jones *et al.*, 2014). Migrant enterprises tend to be small, concentrated in low value catering and retail sectors, and financially-constrained (Ram *et al.*, 2015), a sectoral clustering inevitably reflected in our sample. Hence, migrant entrepreneurship tends to be a marginalised activity often battling for survival in under-rewarded labour-intensive sectors of the advanced urban economy (Kloosterman, 2010). Many migrant firms engage in a variety of revenue-generating activities to survive.

#### *Multiplicity of sources of income and activities on one site*

Engaging in multiple income-earning activities is a valuable response to the kind of scarcity facing many migrant-owned businesses. Using Levi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*, or making do with what is at hand, Baker and Nelson (2005) argue that this approach is central to the survival strategies of many resource constrained small business owners. Typical is the accumulation of supplementary resources from sources outside the firm, a strategy labelled *patch-working*, defined by Kibria (1994, 81) as 'gathering together a wide variety of

resources from diverse social and economic arenas'. Kibria's (1994) study shows how Vietnamese American family businesses protect against economic hardship by pooling the earnings of the firm together with those of various family members, both from paid employment and from welfare benefits.

*Multiple-job holding and portfolio ownership for migrant entrepreneurs*

Studies of migrant patch-working undermine many standard assumptions about entrepreneurship and the role that paid employment might play in these strategies. In particular, attempts to pigeon hole the subjects into 'either-or' binary categories – in particular, employed versus self-employed – fall apart when confronted by the various hybrid combinations being pursued in practice. This might well be a family unit pooling the resources of more than one business and several paid jobs with outside employers. As Folta *et al.* (2010: 2) explain, business entry as 'an "all or none" phenomenon contrasts sharply with recent evidence that a significant proportion of all entrepreneurs engage concurrently in both'. Nor do people necessarily follow a linear career path, entering business and then taking a firm through prescribed stages of development. On the contrary many of the smallest operators 'initiate their ventures while simultaneously working for wages' (Folta *et al.*, 2010: 2), often as a means of easing the transition, sometimes as a longer-term subsidy for the business. In a variation on this theme, Carter, Tagg and Dimitratos (2004) identify several cases of firm owners using outside employment as part of an exit strategy from self-employment.

Entrepreneurs can also operate as multiple business owners, a strategy identified as 'portfolio' entrepreneurship (Carter, Tagg and Dimitratos, 2004) and defined as 'the simultaneous ownership of several businesses' (Carter and Ram, 2003 371). Placing this in historical context, Carter and Ram (2003, 374) suggests, "multiple business activities may be the key reason to explain the survival of the petite bourgeoisie ... small scale capitalism was

differentiated by its ability to engage in multiple activities while also using the family as a free labour resource”. Alongside this, these authors review how several disciplines illuminate the variety of motives for multiple business ownership, including growth management, income diversification, investment strategies, vertical integration and facilitating succession in family businesses (Carter and Ram, 2003). In the latter case, intergenerational continuity is uppermost, as detailed by Ram’s (1994) account of the fragmentation of one single firm into several to expedite children’s involvement in the business.

Multiple business-ownership has also been identified as one of the pathways to market breakout for ethnic minority businesses, a response to market saturation by opening new firms (Theodorakopoulos *et al.*, 2005). More broadly, a common form of patch-working is the husband and wife firm where one partner maintains a paid job to counter a shortage of revenue and to mitigate temporary slumps (Villares-Varela *et al.*, 2017). Yet, whatever the precise expression of this practice, it is evident that we need to abandon rigid static and formalised ways of looking at migrant enterprise. As we shall see from our own findings, socio-economic hybridisation is widespread among new migrant entrepreneurs.

#### *The social agency of migrant entrepreneurs*

Vincent *et al.* (2014) are critical of the neglect of social agency in studies of migrant entrepreneurship, and claim that the influential mixed embeddedness (ME) approach (Kloosterman 2010) emphasises structural constraints at the expense of the efforts of entrepreneurial agents. This is unsurprising since ME aims to demonstrate how ‘outsider’ entrepreneurs are excluded from the full range of business opportunities and Kloosterman’s (2010) sole proposal for agential action is that business owners should undertake market repositioning to more profitable sectors. As he expressly recognises this is easier said than done, given the severe under-capitalisation typical of migrant firm-owners. Whilst Vincent *et*

*al.*'s (2014) call is welcome, their claim for transformational potential of the agency of migrant entrepreneurs needs to be tempered.

The ontology of critical realism that Vincent *et al.* (2014) subscribe to is helpful in its insistence that 'structural powers only exercise causal efficacy by working through agency' (Archer, 2005:24). The temporal dimension of realism is also important for present purposes because it recognises that the exercise of agency can be forward-looking and proactive, rather than fixed to immediate concerns. Relevant here is Emirbayer and Mische's (1998:963) conception of agency 'as a temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)'. Although these components can be analysed separately, they are intertwined in the forms of social agency displayed. Accounts of migrants' coping strategies that focus solely on immediate concerns [for example, Datta *et al.*'s (2007)] exhibit a view of agency that is *partial*, since they only include one element of what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) see as essentially multi-dimensional. The latter are centrally concerned with the temporal dimension of agency and they calibrate the concept to accommodate past, present and future orientations. From this we see that Datta *et al.* (2007) are concerned only with 'evaluative' agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), the actor's immediate response to present dilemmas in the here and now. Tellingly, however, the present dimension is bound up with past and future, the former described as 'habitual' agency, established routine derived from past practices, the latter labelled as 'projective' agency, the aspirational visualisation of a future improvement in life.

This temporal and multi-faceted approach to agency allows Rogaly (2009: 1984) to examine how migrants in the most hostile of settings – rural India – are able to play a role in 'seeking, and obtaining, incremental and sometimes highly significant changes in



microspaces of work and living, albeit it in a world dominated by capital'. Migrant workers who switched to self-employment did so to escape brutal bosses and exercise a degree of control over their working lives. Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2010) label of 'constrained agency' – applied to migrant workers – captures this sentiment and is important for present purposes. They postulate a continuum of worker relative autonomy, running from 'resilience' (small acts of 'getting by') to '*resistance ... direct challenges to capitalist social relations*' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 216). An intermediate category *reworking* comprises 'strategies to lever better terms and conditions' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 216). Central here is a recognition of workers' capacity to shape their own terms and conditions. For our analysis, we draw on a temporal and relational understanding of agency to disentangle how migrant entrepreneurs engage with patch-working. For clarity, we use two principal sources in tandem. Temporal understanding arises from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), whose perspective can be used to ascertain how far any given entrepreneur can be said to be reactive to past experience, coping with present exigencies or aspiring to future goals. Relational understanding is aided by Coe and Jordhus-Lier, whose concern is not with individual actors but with comparisons throughout a selected population. Patch-working is relational in the sense that it is an agent and context dependent process. We would argue that this reflects both the multidimensional character of agency as shown by Emirbayer and Mische and the way agents re-work (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010) their everyday lives.

### **Methodology, methods and data**

We analyse qualitative interviews with 42 migrant business owners in the west Midlands (UK), which took place between 2010 and 2011. Our sampling strategy was 'purposeful' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) given the absence of accurate information on new migrant businesses in the west Midlands region. Our respondents were born abroad and

arrived in the UK post 2000, and we explored with them the strategies they used to survive and develop their businesses. Our semi-structured interview guide examined: the business activity (whether the business is the main activity, proportion of time devoted to the main business, other businesses in which they might be involved, legal status of the company, hours worked in a day, barriers and motivations to start the business, type of customers, competition, changes in the market, turnover, family support, institutional and informal business support); questions about the owner (age, country of origin, level of education, skills/training acquired, occupational trajectories in the UK, previous migration experiences, reasons for migration/settling in the UK and west Midlands, perceptions of social integration in the UK); and questions about employees and helpers (workers not formally employed, such as whether they employ anyone else, how they have recruited workers/helpers, and payment practices, among others. Respondents were also asked about their perceptions of the business activity and its impact on their overall livelihoods. This was formulated by inquiring about whether the business has provided adequate living for the owner. Interviewees' responses ranged from owners who claimed the business provided very comfortable living, adequate living, enough to get by, or very difficult to make ends meet. This question was followed up by inquiring about why they think this was the case, and questions about evaluation of the business activity (uncertainty about the future, success, failure, consolidation or growth stage).

Access was secured by employing four intermediaries from new migrant communities with considerable local knowledge of the types of firms and individuals that we wished to study. Each intermediary had been trained in research methods and enjoyed a record of effective collaboration with the university sector. The use of multiple intermediaries, each with their own myriad contacts, is a form of 'chain referral sampling' (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Penrod *et al.*, 2003), which is an advance on snowball sampling because a

variety of networks are drawn upon. The researchers were solely responsible for devising the interview guides, analysis, interpretation and presentation of the data.

The business owners come from 15 different countries, with Poles (15) and Somalis (12) being the most numerous. Other prominent groups included Iraqi Kurds (7), and Zimbabweans (6). The respondents were comparatively young, with around two-thirds under the age of 40. The businesses were concentrated in a narrow range of economic sectors such as low-end retail, catering, and personal services. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Data analysis followed an iterative process, initially deductively by applying our conceptualization to the accounts provided by the respondents and then inductively, by resorting the data to pre-set categories but also by developing new ones.

The data focuses on the activities developed within each of the businesses, as well as the source of the resources to start up and sustain the business activity, support, access to finance, number of activities, other occupations held, perceptions of success, and turnover. Elsewhere (Edwards *et al.*, 2016) we have examined the extent to which these migrant firms differ from their predecessors in the ‘ethnic economy’.

## **Findings**

Our data showed that migrant entrepreneurs exercise their social agency in a graded continuum, ranging from their capacity to get by, grow or transform their entrepreneurial and working lives. The data reflected the importance of distinguishing between patch-working as *survival*, *growth* and what we have labelled as *transformational growth*. This categorisation has emerged from analysing the data in relation to the turnover of the firms, the perception of the entrepreneur regarding their income and business trajectory, the scale of their operations as well as their aspirations for the future (see Tables 1-3 for a detailed categorisation of these firms).

Our findings draw on Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2010) view that the agency/structure interaction occurs along a kind of continuum, with individuals far from passive but at the same time usually incapable of accomplishing a radical transformation of the sector where they operate. Most of our respondents (those concerned with *survival*) fell into the category called "resilience" by these authors, "small acts of 'getting by' that help individuals and groups cope with everyday realities but do not change social relations" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010, 216). We might regard this as the very essence of patch-working. For a relatively small minority of better capitalised respondents with the capacity to start portfolio firms (*growth* strategy), it has been possible to "materially improve their conditions of existence" (*ibid.* 201: 216), what these writers call "reworking", an undeniable shift but one falling far short of transformative.

Our data showed that strategies stand in relation to the structural positions migrant entrepreneurs occupy, particularly in relation to their access to financial capital and networks. The forms of patchworking agents were able to undertake were therefore relational in the sense that they were constrained, and enabled, by their social-structural positioning. A few migrant entrepreneurs in our sample were equipped with significant financial, human capital and networks. They displayed the capacity for '*transformational growth*', and had substantial high-growth enterprises.

#### *Patch-working as a survival strategy*

Most of our interviewees (28 out of 42 business owners) displayed what Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) label as 'resilience', or small acts of getting by in order to achieve basic survival. The characteristics of these firms mirrored the findings of most studies on migrant entrepreneurship (Vershina et al., 2011; Sepulveda et al., 201; Jones *et al.*, 2014). Survival patch-working strategies emerged from migrants' position in the social structure: financial

capital is scarce and they are trapped in low paid-low value activities. As Kloosterman (2010) indicated, migrant firms are largely segregated into low value market space unwanted by indigenous firms, an exclusion resulting from their lack of resources, ignorance of an alien business environment, the market power of corporate competitors (Rainnie, 1989) and discrimination (Jones *et al.*, 2014). The combined effect of these processes of segregation was seen in the distribution of the firms, mostly confined to the three traditional migrant sectors of retail, catering and personal services. Even by the usual standards of migrant entrepreneurial segregation (Kloosterman, 2010), the proportion of our respondents placed into residual market space was high. Over three quarters of our sample belonged to these sectors, compared with 16 per cent for white British firms nationwide (Jones *et al.*, 2014), a significant gap between mainstream and minority firms. Penurious revenues were the almost inevitable outcome: among the 28 firms in this category, eight had a turnover below £10,000 a year and 12 between £10,000 and £50,000 (eight did not disclose). These poor earnings also demonstrate their pressing needs for alternative income streams.

Patch-working for these entrepreneurs confirms what Kibria (1994) described for Vietnamese families, where migrants combine small amounts of resources from a wide range of sources. This is achieved by: garnering marginal financial resources from scattered sources; diversifying activities within one business site, or incorporating income from paid employment. These entrepreneurs were primarily concerned with evaluative agency (day-to-day survival) in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) terms; but they pursued alternative strategies too (and therefore a probably marginal element of projective agency in achieving security by engaging in different kinds of patch-working). Half of respondents in this category gathered resources from a wide range of sources (family, friends and others) to establish and maintain the firm. LO3 and AK6 explained this strategy:

I never had that huge amount of money for setting up a business, but I teamed up with my blood brother and close family members to set up our own business [...] then also some family savings, and then a borrowed from a close friend (LO3, owner of mini market from Somalia)

I have tried to get credit from UK bank but couldn't get anything. I borrowed money from some English friends without any interest. Then my brother in law also loaned me £1500. I still need to invest in decorating the place, products and equipment (AK6, owner of cake confection business from Poland)

Diversification of activities within one site was a common approach to fostering the resilience noted by Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2010). Twenty-one of 28 in this category engaged in more than one activity on a single site. Somali supermarket owner LO1 explained that having a money services agency inside the business premises helped to diversify earnings:

I opened the supermarket. Then I also started to make contacts with X Money Services Transfer Agency whose headquarters are in Dubai to offer me the contract so I can add it as part of my business to control the flow of customers. Customers would be coming to buy food products and at the same time they can also to transfer money abroad to their families, relatives or friends wherever they are in the world while in the shop. (LO1, owner of supermarket from Somalia)

Diversification often comes also from holding multiple jobs simultaneously (five owners in this category), which helps to supplement meagre business revenues. Agency here was displayed mainly in its iterational form (past events taken into account to act in the present). For these firms, staying involved in paid employment cushioned the low turnover of their firms and enabled the survival of their firms and households. MU1, for example, combined income from his care job with the business activity, whilst MU4 worked as a part-time nurse and in his fishmonger business:

Customers are spending less and less. It is really hard. Sometimes I think about stopping the business but I do get satisfaction of it. But recession is hitting so hard. So I use the weekends to do some care work [...] this way I can sustain the business (MU1, owner of internet café from Ghana).

Some customers have not been able to buy fish as they used to, so the result has been that the business income has not been good as it should be [...] Maybe because I don't rely too much on the income from my business... most of the time I do spend the money from my job and the business money I keep it for the business and when things are difficult the business is not that affected. [...] (MU4, fishmonger from Zimbabwe).

Despite severe constraints then, owners' survival strategies can be surprisingly creative. They deployed a number of patch-working strategies to survive and secure the future viability of their enterprises. Though present day concerns or evaluative agency are paramount, projective agency was not entirely absent. The myriad patch-working strategies revealed by the findings illustrate considerable resilience and a determination to improve their situation through diversification of their activities.

#### *Patch-working as growth*

Although most owners adopted 'survival' strategies that enabled them to get by, there were also cases where patch-working could – by 'reworking' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010) – result in business *growth*. The exercise of social agency was reflected here by business owners running dynamic enterprises that are engaged in processes of growth and diversification through various patch-working strategies. Eleven firms with a turnover between £50,000 and £250,000 were in this category. These entrepreneurs have been able to expand or are in the process of expanding their firms. They exhibited 'projective' agency in their intention to grow rather than simply survive or get by. This future orientation is made possible by their more privileged social position, which arose from longer residence in the country, wider access to new networks, diversification of their credit sources and contacts with other businesses in the community.

Patch-working in these cases promoted growth rather than survival. This reflected the embeddedness of agential properties of individuals and the available opportunities for entrepreneurs underpinned by a projective element of social agency. This was the case for business owners like L09 who, after running a single restaurant in Birmingham, opened a shop-café-money transfer in Birmingham, and a minimarket and restaurant in Bristol. This involved opening up new firms for other family and community member in order to secure long-term sustainability. He explains:

I always wanted to expand. Because you never know if one business can fail and stops making profit. So when I saw that the first branch was giving me profit I re-invested, thinking of other family members who can also work there in the future if they need to' (L09, owner of minimarket and restaurants)

These strategies of reworking conditions by engaging in portfolio entrepreneurship was displayed by Polish owners (AK13) who shared their time among a computer shop, an advertising website for Polish entrepreneurs and a hairdressing salon/solarium. This diversification has resulted in three growing ventures. Their projective evaluation of job satisfaction was the prime motive for diversifying their portfolio since the original business did not utilise its owner's skills; the latter enterprises were more aligned with her capabilities. She elaborates:

I have set the computer store, the solarium, hairdresser and a Polish website. In my main business I am 10 hours a day, 6 days a week [...] You need to like your job. The employment I had before [*in paid employment*] was physically hard. I did not like it, I wasn't using my brain. You need to think of how in the future you are going to train and develop your skills. So having different businesses helps us with that (AK13, owner of computer shop from Poland)



Consistent with the notion of Polish migrants as “long distance commuters” (Legrain, 2009), our sample contained at least one example of multi-national ownership straddling the west Midlands and Poland. The owner (AK1) ran a computer repair business, has paid employment in Birmingham, and was about to start a real estate business in Poland. In this case, multiple job holding was combined with a portfolio strategy to diversify income, but also as a full blown residential exit strategy dedicated to a long term future at home in Poland, a truly comprehensive illustration of the projective agency concept (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As he explained:

I have different business activities, currently setting up something in Poland, to work in a company that sells homes. I work 4 hours in this business. I also work 8 hours at a telecommunication company as an employee, so 4 hours here, 8 hours there. I mainly rely on my job at X (AK1, owner of computer repair and unlocking services company from Poland)

#### *Patch-working as transformational growth*

Finally, our sample includes three cases of entrepreneurs who utilised patch-working as a means of *transformational growth*. These entrepreneurs have presided over considerable business growth, and are intent on further expansion. They ran businesses that turnover between £250,000 and £1 million pounds. They were not subverting their conditions by breaking out to other sectors as suggested by Kloosterman (2010), but by scaling-up their operations within the stereotypically migrant sectors of catering and food retailing. Two of the owners have run businesses in their countries of origin, and drawn this past experience (or habitual agency) in the current and planned ventures. They have managed to secure large sums of capital from family savings, the sale of property from their countries of origin, and from mainstream banks (following the success of their initial enterprises).

Both LO12 and LO15 owned sizeable firms in their country of origin and have been able to transfer sufficient capital (Harding, 2012) to fund a continuation of their entrepreneurial careers in Britain. Riding high in the catering trade was LO12. His chain of pizza/burger businesses has 22 outlets in the west Midlands. He explained how his privileged position in networks within the more established community has enabled him to ‘think big’:

I employ more than 100 people in my pizza and burger businesses in the west Midlands [...] The sources of finance I used for starting my business come from my previous investments ... and contributions from people who have a stake in the business. The business is linked to other businesses that I have established with other stakeholders from Iranian and other ethnic communities here in Birmingham and we all contributed an income to start the business and all of us have a stake in the business ... People who started the business with me were not family or friends but they were members of the Iranian community [...] having these resources and my wife and family support helped me to think big (LO12, owner of pizza and burger complex from Iran)

LO15 from Afghanistan also had the opportunity to mobilise financial capital by selling his assets in his home country. This capital and his entrepreneurial flair have produced five food super-stores in Birmingham and neighbouring locations. He stressed how offering his products to the broader migrant community instead of being restricted to his own nationality allowed him to grow:

I had some savings I could bring from home that were enough to start, and then some support from friends and family in the community [...] I’ve started researching what products our neighbours want to purchase, asking around, seeing what others sell [...] This area is very diverse, every nationality is around here. And I ordered all of these [*products*]. So anyone can come and find what they are looking for in any of my shops. And also locals who want to try other products (LO15, owner of food stores)

For these two high fliers, a minor case for strategic innovation based on a practical-evaluative and projective element of their agency might be made on the basis that they have tapped into a novel market niche, the *co-migrant* customer base which, unlike the rather

narrow market space offered by co-ethnicity, provides the rather more expansive prospects enabled by a wide diversity of nationalities. According to recent research, co-migrancy is now beginning to supplant co-ethnicity as a bonding mechanism for migrant groups in the British city (Baznitsky and McDowell, 2013), a cosmopolitanism celebrated as a source of custom by supermarket proprietor LO15, who saw it as also extending to native-born students and young people in search of “non-English” produce.

Yet the impact of these new marketing patterns is slight. What distinguishes these comparative giants from their struggling counterparts in corner shops is financial capital, which underlines the importance of structural conditions. This highlights the importance of the embeddedness of migrants within the social structure to explain the ways in which they can exert their social agency. The success of our two high achievers reflects the effects of self-reproducing wealth; and more specifically a recognition that the leading achievers in our sample have based their success on accumulated assets transferred from the homeland or a previous country of residence, which has allowed them to exert a more projective agency.

## **Discussion**

Our findings contribute to debates on migrant incorporation in the labour market (Ahmad, 2008; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Anderson, 2010) by highlighting the role of social agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Coe and Jordhus-Lier’s, 2010). The foregoing account of patch-working practices set out to throw further light on the long-running theme of the inherent disadvantages faced by migrant business owners in the advanced capitalist city and on their often-robust responses to them. Hitherto, the work of authors such as Kibria (1994) reveals the role of cost-cutting practices, often extreme, bordering on the desperate and driving the entrepreneur beyond the regulatory boundaries (Edwards *et al.*, 2016). The present discussion demonstrates the capacity of patch-working to produce entrepreneurial outcomes move beyond sheer survival.

Migrant entrepreneurs are shown to be highly active social agents, displaying considerable inventiveness in their deployment of a multitude of survival strategies in the face of disadvantage. Consistent with earlier work (Jones and Ram, 2007), we have highlighted the resilience of these operators, their ability to compensate for a lack of conventional resources by the agile juggling of multiple activities, the bringing together of a large number of separate parts in the interests of survival. Importantly, however, this falls short of endorsing Vincent et al.'s (2014) arguments about the transformative powers of *bricolage* as utilised by migrant-origin entrepreneurs and none of our findings should be taken to mean that small entrepreneurs are necessarily *empowered* by this display of social agency or are able to transform the nature or structure of the labour market in which they are inserted. Although Vincent et al. (2014) make a plausible theoretical case for the transformative possibilities of entrepreneurial agency, they provide little direct concrete evidence of this. Certainly for our respondents, the overall impression is less of operators imposing their own terms on the world and more of creating an inhabitable world out of harsh conditions by the use of imaginative strategies.

In developing this agency-as-survival theme, useful guidance is provided by Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010, 214) who see social agency as “intentional, purposive and meaningful actions”. This has a direct bearing on entrepreneurs, whose entire point is to bring into being some previously non-existent good or service – or to organise someone else to do so. Most of our respondents fall into the category called “resilience” by these authors (*ibid*: 216), which emerges as the very essence of patch-working. A relatively small minority of better capitalised respondents with the capacity to finance portfolio firms and showing a greater degree of projective agency, it has been possible to re-work their conditions. Although migrant entrepreneurs have been able to change aspects of their working lives and organisational strategies (e.g. their volume and sources of revenue, the way they operate their

businesses), there have not been changes in the structures of the sector in which they are embedded, displaying well-rehearsed historical continuity (Jones *et al.*, 2014) for new waves of migrant entrepreneurs. Hence, we endorse their conception of agential empowerment as a finely graded variable rather than some sort of absolute, a perspective very much in the spirit of Archer's (2003, 8) observation that the agency-structure interplay is "conditional rather than deterministic".

Notwithstanding their singular backstories, the firms that engaged in patch-working with the effect of what we have labelled as *transformational growth* share various attributes which are unrepresentative of the average run of migrant firms and that relate to a better position in terms of access to financial capital, access to networks and/or length of stay in the country. This enables them to put in place strategies that relate to future outcomes beyond day-to-day getting by, which echoes the importance of structural positions in the mobilisation of agency for migrant entrepreneurs.

## **Conclusion**

By showing how migrant business owners use patch-working strategies to facilitate survival and growth, this paper confirms that even within the stifling structural constraints there is sufficient space for the exertion of a significant degree of effective willpower (Jones and Ram, 2007). Extant research has either neglected the role of social agency or exaggerated its transformational potential. On the first of these issues, we present a nuanced qualification to the mixed embeddedness approach. While we endorse Kloosterman's (2010) stress on the market exclusion of migrant entrepreneurs, our findings also show that within narrow structural limits patch-working strategies produce an unexpected variety of enterprises, by no means all of whom are wholly concerned with survival. We consider this to be an important refinement of mixed embeddedness theory, closely in line with recent proposals put forward by Jones *et al.* (2017). The adaptation of Coe and Jordhus-Lier's

(2010) graded approach to social agency has also proved fruitful and can be implemented in further research that examines the trajectory of migrant entrepreneurship (ideally using longitudinal methods).

At the same time as the balance between structure and agency needs to be recalibrated, it would be unrealistic to veer too far towards the latter. Whilst our findings demonstrate the capacity of migrant entrepreneurs to re-work their everyday environment, we caution against notions of economic liberation. These findings interrogate in particular claims related to the transformational potential of agency for migrant entrepreneurs (Vincent et al., 2014). Although our data show that the agency of migrant entrepreneurs might be conducive of minor changes in revenue, organisation of employment and sources of income, they are not capable of changing the nature of the sector, nor the overall position of migrant entrepreneurs within the current structural context. In doing, so we highlighted the ways in which agency is inseparable from the ways in which migrants are embedded in social structures and their social positioning.

Research on marginalised groups like migrants inevitably faces challenges when examining potentially sensitive information like the acquisition and use of financial resources. We would have liked to collect data on profitability of the businesses, and the degree to which owners utilised their income on the venture, their household or on remittances to support family elsewhere. However, such level of detail of how finances were organised was not possible to obtain. If money is transferred elsewhere and is therefore not deployed in the business, this can have an important effect on the "success" or lack of it of these entrepreneurs. Access to such information would help us to qualify some of our findings on the strategies deployed by entrepreneurs, but we consider that it would not alter our overall conclusions significantly.

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## **Author biographies**

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Monder Ram is Director of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME) and Co-Director of the Enterprise and Diversity Alliance (EDA) at the Birmingham Business School. He has extensive experience of working in, researching and acting as a consultant to small and ethnic minority businesses. He is a leading authority on small business and ethnic minority entrepreneurship research and has published widely on the subject. Monder's work has been supported by grants from a full range of research funding bodies; including research councils, government departments, regional and local agencies and the private sector.

Trevor Jones is one of the UK's foremost researchers on ethnic minority entrepreneurship. He is recognised as a pioneer in the field, and was responsible for the first systematic study of ethnic minority businesses in the UK. Trevor continues to publish extensively in a wide range of journals. He is author of 'Ethnic Minorities in Business' with Monder Ram. Trevor is currently working on a wide variety of issues relating to ethnic minority enterprise, including: new migrant entrepreneurs; the employment of migrant workers; and the historical development of ethnic minority business research in Europe.



**Tables**

**Table 1. Patch-working as survival strategy**

Age	Cod	Type of business	Country of origin	Gender	Turnover	Number of activities within one business site	Portfolio entrepreneur	Multiple job-holding	Relying on income/capital from family members or friends
7	MU	Window cleaner	Zimbabwe	Male	<£10k	1	Second business, moving van	Shares his time with second business	Unknown
1	MU	Internet café	Ghana	Male	<£10k	3	Second business, IT support	Shares his time with second business	Unknown
7	AK	Car repair	Poland	Male	undisclosed	1	N/A	Part-time mechanic	Yes
12	MU	IT	Rwanda	Male	<£10k	2	N/A	Part time waiter	Yes
3	MU	Interior/fabric design	Zimbabwe	Female	undisclosed	1	N/A	Part time hairdresser	Yes
6	MU	African food shop	Nigeria	Female	<£10k	1	N/A	Part time carer	Yes
4	MU	Fish shop	Zimbabwe	Male	£10-£50k	1	N/A	Part-time nurse	Yes
4	AK	Grocery shop	Poland	Male	£10-£50k	2	N/A	N/A	No
12	AK	Restaurant	Poland	Male	undisclosed	2	N/A	N/A	No
4	LO	Money transfer and travel agency	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	2	N/A	N/A	No
1	HM	Mini market	Iraq (Kurdish)	Male	£10-£50k	2	N/A	N/A	Unknown
3	HM	Internet café	Iraq (Kurdish)	Male	<£10k	2	N/A	N/A	Yes
3	AK	Hairdresser salon	Poland	Female	undisclosed	2	N/A	N/A	Yes

9	AK	Beauty Studio	Poland	Female	undisclosed	2	N/A	N/A	Yes
5	LO	Mini market	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	2	N/A	N/A	Yes
8	LO	Computer and phone shop	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	2	N/A	N/A	Yes
11	LO	Accessories shop	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	3	N/A	N/A	Yes
7	LO	Computer and phone shop	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	3	N/A	N/A	Yes
1	LO	super market	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	4	N/A	N/A	No
3	LO	Mini market and money transfer	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	4	N/A	N/A	No
5	AK	Tanning shop	Poland	Female	undisclosed	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
6	AK	Cakes confection	Poland	Female	£10-£50k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
15	AK	Photography studio	Poland	Female	<£10k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
2	LO	Clothing shop	Somalia	Female	<£10k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
6	LO	General store	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
9	MU	Driving Tuition	Tanzania	Male	undisclosed	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
3	MU	Interior/fabric design	Zimbabwe	Female	undisclosed	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
5	MU	Hair and Beauty Parlour	Zimbabwe	Male	<£10k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes

**Table 2. Patch-working as growth**



Case	Cod	Type of business	Country of origin	Gender	Turnover	Number of activities within one business site	Portfolio entrepreneurship	Multiple job-holding	Relying on income/capital from family members or friends
13	LO	Grocery shop	Iraq	Male	£50-£250k	3	Second grocery shop	Shares his time with second business	Yes
17	LO	Restaurant	Iraq (Kurdish)	Male	£50-£250k	1	Three other businesses	N/A	Yes
1	AK	Phone repair	Poland	Male	£10-£50k	2	Second business in Poland	Working in telecommunication company	No
2	MU	Food shop	DRC	Male	£10-£50k	1	Second business barber shop	Shares his time with second business	No
11	MU	Butcher	Zimbabwe	Male	£50-£250k	1	Second butcher shop	Shares his time with second business	No
10	MU	Internet café	Somalia	Male	<£10k	2	Second business IT	Shares his time with second business	No
10	LO	Mini market	Somalia	Male	£10-£50k	3	3	Shares his time among his 3 businesses	Yes
14	LO	Restaurant	Iraq	Male	£50-£250k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
9	LO	Restaurant	Somalia	Male	£50-£250k	1	3	N/A	Yes
8	MU	Restaurant	Uganda	Male	£50-£250k	1	N/A	N/A	Yes
13	AK	Computer store	Poland	Male	£10-£50k	2	Second business hairdresser salon	N/A	Yes

**Table 3- Patch-working as transformational growth**

de	Co of business	Type of business	Country of origin	Gender	Turnover	Number of activities within one business site	Portfolio entrepreneurship	Multiple job- holding	Relying on income/capital from family members or friends
<b>15</b>	<b>LO</b>	Super market	Afghanist an	Male	£250- £1mill	1	Second supermarket	Shares his time with second business	No
<b>K11</b>	<b>A</b>	Food shop	Poland	Male	£250- £1mill	2	Two other food shops in the region	Shares his time with second business	No
<b>12</b>	<b>LO</b>	Pizza and burger complex	Iran	Male	£250- £1mill	1	22 business	N/A	Unknown

<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we define ‘migrant’ entrepreneurs as those recently arrived entrepreneurs (2000- ), to distinguish them from the ‘traditional’ waves of migration that settled in the UK since the 1960s.