

Intersectionality and Mixed Methods for Social Context in Entrepreneurship

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Accepted for publication in

International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research

16 Aug 2018

Abstract

Purpose This conceptual paper has two central aims: to critically analyse the potential of intersectionality theory as a means by which to understand aspects of context in entrepreneurship studies, and advocate for the value of a realist perspective and mixed methods approaches to produce better intersectional research on entrepreneurship.

Design/methodology/approach Highlighting context as an emerging topic within entrepreneurship literature, the paper examines how drawing upon notions of intersectionality and positionality can help to explain the social context for entrepreneurial activity and outcomes, particularly in terms of agency and resources.

Findings The paper complements and extends existing intersectional approaches to entrepreneurship studies by introducing Archer's critical realist philosophical perspective on agency and Anthias' positional perspective on resource access, considering the usefulness of realism and mixed methods approaches for such work, and outlining a methodologically informed potential research agenda for the area.

Originality/value The paper offers a theoretical foundation for researchers to begin systematically exploring social entrepreneurial context by accounting for the effects of overarching intersecting structures such as gender, race, and socio-economic class (amongst others), presents empirical methods through which these social-structural influences, and the degree of their impact, can be identified and analysed, and suggests a philosophically robust means of conceptualising how, in combination with agency, they influence essential aspects of entrepreneurial activity.

Introduction

An emerging stream of literature is calling for greater and more explicit attention to context (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Zahra and Wright, 2011) to better understand and explain the wide range of entrepreneurial activity that exists, and the inconclusive evidence about the same (Alvarez *et al.*, 2012; Calás *et al.*, 2009; Chrisman *et al.*, 2012; Jones and Spicer, 2009). Increasing attention to context is a logical development for a field that considers within its remit such a variety of activity and effects (Acs, 2006; Baumol, 1996), and is heavily influenced by multiple disciplinary perspectives, such as economics, psychology, and sociology, which only rarely find common ground. Various sub-contexts from across these disciplines, such as social, temporal, institutional, organisational, and industry contexts, are identified in the literature (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Morrison, 2006). Yet, the means by which to effectively understand what is meant by context, and how to analyse it, is still underexplored in the literature (Morrison, 2006; Zahra and Wright, 2011). Suggested frameworks' treatment of social context is lacking: social contextual dimensions are labelled 'culture' or 'social context', but exactly how researchers are to apprehend such vague and nebulous constructs poses a significant problem for knowledge creation. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how intersectionality theory may be a means by which to systematically operationalise and investigate key aspects of the social context in which actors engage in entrepreneurship. Intersectionality theory is invaluable in its attention to the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory effects of various social structures (Nash, 2008), its awareness of power (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016), and its conceptualisation of the interaction of multiple social hierarchies with individual identity (Martinez Dy *et al.* 2014), or in sociological terms, structure and agency (Archer 2007). As such, it is an ideal means by which to begin to examine the relationships between entrepreneurial actors and their social contexts, which in turn offers a potentially productive interdisciplinary theoretical foundation from which to study entrepreneurship.

Intersectionality in entrepreneurship research is an emergent area (Essers *et al.*, 2010; Forson, 2013; Knight, 2016). Primarily applied to qualitative studies of marginalised or underrepresented entrepreneurial populations, intersectionality has been used as a flexible theoretical framework to understand their experiences within particular gendered, raced and classed business sectors (Forson, 2013), aid analyses of entrepreneurial resources (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017; Valdez, 2016), and explore the way they construct their entrepreneurial identities in potentially hostile environments (Essers *et al.*, 2010). Due to the complexity of the underlying issues associated with inequality and marginality, there is much room for further

qualitative intersectional research amongst different groups of entrepreneurs. Notably, however, the concept of intersectionality also points us in the direction of wider social-structural patterns of information (Hancock, 2007) that are unable to be ascertained through qualitative methods alone. To that end, there is a growing interest in using quantitative methods in intersectionality (Dubrow, 2008; Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005), while mixed methods research is an emergent approach in entrepreneurship studies (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012). This paper thus identifies potential for a future research agenda in mixed methods intersectional research in entrepreneurship studies to better understand key aspects of social context.

This paper proceeds as follows: first, it considers the call for context in the entrepreneurship field and extends current conceptualisations of ‘the social’ in three extant frameworks. Next, it introduces intersectionality and a related concept, positionality, as theoretical vehicles for the study of entrepreneurial context. Underpinned by a realist perspective, this framework offers critical insight into how actors enact agency and mobilise resources to navigate their environments and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. Finally, it introduces mixed methods as an emerging means by which to conduct intersectional entrepreneurship research and outline a potential future research agenda for the area.

The call for (social) context in entrepreneurship studies

While in recent decades entrepreneurship studies has been recognised as a legitimate scholarly discipline, featuring regularly in top management, organisational behaviour, strategy and finance journals (Ireland *et al.*, 2005), there exists continued debate about the boundaries of the field, the impact and inconclusiveness of its findings (Jones and Spicer, 2009; Zahra and Wright, 2011). Scholars have highlighted the need for a substantive shift in the framing and focus of the field, to foster the creation of consensus-changing research and precipitate a step change in methodological rigour, enabling us to better understand when, how and why entrepreneurship happens, and who becomes involved (Welter, 2011; Zahra and Wright, 2011). In entrepreneurship research, context refers to the ‘circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments that are external to the respective phenomenon and enable or constrain it’ (Welter, 2011, p. 167). The notion of context has emerged as a rare consensus point from which the field may move into the future, as it can support identification of relevant research questions, theory and methods, and ‘give meaning to the findings, clarify the field’s contestable boundaries, and enhance the overall research quality’ (Zahra and Wright, 2011, p. 68).

While it is generally accepted that entrepreneurial activity takes place in a wide variety of settings, undertaken as it is by numerous populations in a range of national, regional, and cultural milieus (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2013; Carter *et al.*, 2015; Imas *et al.* 2012), context is still a surprisingly underexplored area of entrepreneurship and innovation research (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Pathak *et al.*, 2013). Reasons for this include historical limitations of method, such as an overreliance on mail surveys, a dearth of longitudinal and field studies, and the tendency of some quantitative researchers to introduce statistical controls for context rather than considering its potential influence (Zahra and Wright, 2011). There may also exist more fundamental differences in research aim, for example, interest in obtaining generalizable findings and broad causal laws that transcend context (Hjorth *et al.*, 2008; Zahra and Wright, 2011). Nevertheless, a contextual approach may usefully improve entrepreneurial research at every level of analysis. At the macro level, it facilitates the recognition of spatial, cultural, political, technological and institutional forces (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Welter, 2011); at the meso, it enriches research on organisational context and entrepreneurial resource distribution; at the micro, it sharpens understanding of the micro-processes of entrepreneurial innovation, such as individual cognitions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours (Zahra and Wright 2011, p.77). Introducing a contextualised approach to entrepreneurship research could address the field's 'almost myopic focus on the individual, the team, and the resulting venture' (Autio *et al.*, 2014, p. 1059) by expanding analyses to include how context informs entrepreneurial agency, behaviour and outcomes.

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Social context, in particular, is much more than a simple container for entrepreneurial activity; actors are located in multiple social contexts over time with which they interact, influencing their identities, circumstances, choices and entrepreneurial experiences (Chasserio *et al.*, 2014; Wang, 2018). Social context, which cuts across levels of analysis, features in three key conceptual contextual frameworks explored here (Table 1). In Autio *et al.*'s (2014) framework, the social stands alone and is given the same apparent theoretical weight as organisational, institutional/policy, and industry/technology context; in Zahra and Wright's (2011) framework, it is melded into 'socio-cultural-economic-political' and placed under the 'practice' dimension of the phenomenon; in Welter's (2011) framework, it refers primarily to social networks, households and family contexts. While these ways of postulating the relevance of 'the social' to entrepreneurial context are useful to an extent, they are inherently limited by lack of attention to a key defining detail: namely, the multiplicity of social

hierarchies that structure society. Multiple social hierarchies – for example, those of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, among others – operate simultaneously, albeit to different degrees at different times, enabling and constraining behaviour through the unequal distribution of power, influence, material and cultural resources, and their accrual over the life course (Anthias, 2001a; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014; Rouse and Kitching, 2006). Although such social hierarchies vary widely depending on (inter)national, regional, and local settings, they nonetheless shape the social contexts for entrepreneurial endeavours (Agius Vallejo and Canizales, 2016; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017; Valdez, 2011).

Feminist and critical entrepreneurship studies have contributed vital insights on the relevance of social hierarchies for the study of entrepreneurship. They highlight the way in which hegemonic conceptions of the entrepreneur privileging men, masculinity, and whiteness disadvantage women and people of colour (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Ogbor, 2000). Together with gender, social class structures have also been identified as influential to the outcome of entrepreneurial activity, illustrated in the findings of social embeddedness and life course approaches (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Anderson and Miller, 2003; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014). Additional structures of inequality, including race, ethnicity, and migrant status, affect the entrepreneurial activity of people from racialised, ethnic and migrant groups, whose disadvantage is thus magnified (Carter *et al.*, 2015; Essers *et al.*, 2010; Knight, 2016). However, social hierarchies do not only shape experiences of disadvantage, but also have enabling and constraining effects upon everyone in their bounds, whether in positions of privilege or oppression, or likely, some complex combination of the two (Collins, 1990). Such positions are not static but can change across space and time (Anthias, 2013).

Thus, the body of literature on intersectionality and positionality, with its notions of social hierarchies, power, structure and agency could bring much to bear upon entrepreneurship research into social context (Hancock, 2007; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014). Explicitly introducing the concept of social hierarchies to discussions of social context provides an essential backdrop to accepted theories and constructs within entrepreneurship research – such as the resource-based view (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001), human and social capital (Davidsson and Honig, 2003), and social networks (Leyden *et al.*, 2014; Ulhøi, 2005) – which are often presented as if in a social vacuum. Intersectionality and positionality could also sharpen the popular, yet vague, mixed embeddedness and bricolage theories of entrepreneurial agency (Vincent *et al.*, 2014) as well as offer insight into the discovery/creation debate on the entrepreneurial process

(Alvarez *et al.*, 2012), through a variety of possible interventions, some of which are now explored here.

Intersectional interventions in entrepreneurship studies

First coined by Crenshaw (1989), but with a long history in Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990; Hancock, 2007), intersectionality is understood as the interaction of social structures, such that advantages or disadvantages attached to social categories and their hierarchical positions – e.g. of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, and disability, to name a few – work ‘simultaneously and in concert’ (Essers *et al.*, 2010, p. 323). Various approaches to intersectionality research exist (McCall, 2005), as do critiques of its popularity and perceived ‘buzzword’ status (Carbin and Edenheim, 2013; Davis, 2008), and its mainstreaming and depoliticisation (Bilge, 2013; Dhamoon, 2011); these debates are vigorous and ongoing in feminist scholarship (Collins, 2015; Gunnarsson, 2011; Nash, 2015). Although contemporary intersectional work fuses structuralist and poststructuralist influences (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014; McKibbin *et al.*, 2015), at its heart are three key assumptions: first, people are subject to the effects of multiple social categories or identities at once, such that categories like ‘women’, ‘British’ or ‘Millennials’ are axiomatically heterogeneous and contain within them a diversity of unequal lived experiences (Emejulu, 2008; Walby *et al.*, 2012). Second, social hierarchies, and the relationships of power, privilege and oppression they produce are central to analyses and must not be ignored (Dhamoon 2011; Nash, 2008). Third, social categories are both properties of the individual agent as well as of the social structure; while relatively durable, they are also fluid and can be dynamic over time (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014; Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016).

For these reasons, intersectionality has been introduced into various fields to supplement inadequate conceptualisations of diversity and power (Hankivsky, 2014) with more complex and nuanced analyses (Nash, 2008). Although it has crossed disciplinary borders as a legitimate theoretical paradigm (Hancock, 2007; Nash, 2011), the entrepreneurship field has yet to engage meaningfully with the concept, and the body of knowledge it has produced. While a handful of scholars have taken an intersectional approach to studying entrepreneurial activity (Essers *et al.*, 2010; Knight, 2016; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017; Valdez, 2016), the essential questions highlighted by such an approach – about multiple social hierarchies, the enabling effects of power and privilege, and oppressive constraints of low or marginal social positions upon agency – have not been addressed by entrepreneurship research more broadly, to detrimental effect; this paper in particular problematises extant conceptualisations of

entrepreneurial agency and resources. Social positions have significant impacts on known entrepreneurial enablers, such as education, experience and resources: it is no social accident that, for example, high-tech entrepreneurs tend to come from the highest strata of the paid earnings distribution and have access to social networks with more power and influence than most (Braguinsky *et al.*, 2012; Dashti, 2010), while in contrast, low socio-economic positions have been found to impede high-ability individuals from participation in advanced educational programs (Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach, 2012). Research that assumes entrepreneurs operate in isolation from their context has resulted in problematic knowledge outcomes in which entrepreneurial behaviour, success and failure are attributed primarily to individuals (Pathak *et al.*, 2013). For example, studies may give minimal demographic information about the sample, generalise the results of a study with a roughly homogenous sample, or abstract to a degree where the impact of social position over the life course is seen as irrelevant, focusing instead on de-contextualised measures of experience, ability, human and social capital, or personality (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; do Paço *et al.*, 2011; Hartog *et al.*, 2010; Lüthje and Franke, 2003; Politis, 2005). In such studies, potential intersectional experiences within samples are ignored, and many types of people are excluded; while these limitations go unacknowledged, findings are often treated and received as if they are universal.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurship research has proliferated to include studies of non-normative entrepreneurs, such as ethnic entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs, young and older entrepreneurs (Carter *et al.*, 2015; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Ram and Jones, 2008). However, there are significant limitations to what intersectionality scholars refer to as ‘single-axis’ approaches (Forson, 2009; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017) considering only one category of difference, whether gender, ethnicity, or age, due to the heterogeneity of people within any particular social category. Intersectional approaches bring novel findings to light: for instance, amongst ethnic minority groups in the UK, known ethnic entrepreneurship patterns are much more applicable to men than they are to women (Kwong *et al.*, 2009), the household wealth patterns of different minority groups seem to hinge on gender (Emejulu, 2008), and in the US, race plays a role in the network connectivity of women entrepreneurs (Neumeyer *et al.*, 2018). Recent work on the future of gender research in entrepreneurship calls for intersectional approaches to advance the agenda beyond narrow investigations of women’s entrepreneurship, to examine how gender and other social ascriptions and positions affect entrepreneurial actors more generally (Ahl 2006; Jennings and Brush 2013; Martinez Dy and Marlow 2017). Together with a related construct, positionality, intersectionality can explain key social aspects

of entrepreneurship. Positionality, as described by Anthias, is two-pronged: it ‘combines a reference to social position (as a set of effectivities: as outcome) and social positioning (as a set of practices, actions and meanings: as process),’ (2001a, p. 634). As such, it is durable, yet dynamic over time. By offering explanatory insight into entrepreneurial conceptions of social context, intersectionality and positionality can produce a shift in the field towards attending to context more generally. Table 2 examines how accounting for intersectionality could enhance existing conceptions of some key constructs in the field.

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To illustrate, two specific applications of these constructs could be used to enhance current notions of social context in entrepreneurship scholarship: first, the way in which one’s social positionality conditions and shapes the exercise of *agency*, and second, its impact upon *resource* asymmetry and access. Both are micro-foundations of the entrepreneurial process identified as major contextual lacunae (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Zahra and Wright, 2011) and which are ontologically prior to the ‘rational’ choices actors are expected to make, which are historically centered in economic conceptions of the entrepreneurial process (Mole and Roper, 2012).

Contextualising Agency

A common, yet often implicit, assumption in entrepreneurship studies is that the phenomenon is predominantly an agential and meritocratic activity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Blundel, 2007). Accordingly, its agential aspects have been closely examined from a variety of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives (Block and Koellinger, 2009; Korsgaard, 2011; Watson, 2013). Yet the way in which social structures interact with and impact upon agency are still under-theorised; approaches such as structuration and embeddedness theory have been put forward to address this conceptual gap (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Sarason *et al.*, 2006), but they have not fully theorised the effects of the constellation of social forces that entrepreneurial actors encounter, nor the agential ways in which they respond (Mole and Mole, 2010; Vincent *et al.*, 2014). Such forces typically manifest as events and signals from institutional and personal sources such as family, schools, the state, the labour market, partners, investors, detractors, and customers. Accordingly, individuals in various structural positions tend to have different experiences, as well as constraints and enablements to their subsequent choices and courses of action. Furthermore, while intersectional work is a sophisticated school of thought on both structural and agential issues (Hancock, 2007), the literature has historically

been stronger in structural analyses, lacking a well-defined theory of agency (Nash, 2008). As such, intersectional literature would benefit from a deeper and broader philosophical underpinning to help entrepreneurship researchers navigate this novel conceptual terrain. This paper therefore introduces a critical realist philosophical perspective on agency that, when combined with intersectional thinking, offers a systematic conceptual framework for understanding entrepreneurial agential action (Archer, 2007; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014; Vincent *et al.*, 2014).

In the critical realist literature on structure and agency premised upon the work of Archer, individuals engage with social structures by way of their internal conversations, where they consider a constellation of concerns and decide upon courses of action, enabled and/or constrained by structure and culture (Archer, 1988, 2007; Elder-Vass, 2007; Vincent *et al.*, 2014). Despite some critiques that this conceptualization may overemphasise the agent and too readily privilege the conscious, decisive mind over the largely unconscious habit or convention that underpins much human activity (Akram, 2010; Mutch, 2004; 2007), this abstract framework for how agents make decisions is useful for understanding a key micro-process of entrepreneurship. For example, one's entrepreneurial intention, or type of entrepreneurial activity, may be weighed up against how promising employment prospects might be, or the consequences for illegal or grey economy activity (Baumol, 1996). In another case, a seemingly value-destroying decision to exit a successful business might be influenced, say, by family commitments (Wennberg *et al.*, 2010). Such a perspective explicitly considers the temporality and transformative potential of such decisions, helping to explain fit or tension between entrepreneurs and the environments they inhabit, how they navigate and act upon them, and how this may reproduce or transform social structure over time (Elder-Vass, 2008; Vincent *et al.*, 2014).

An understanding of seemingly generic entrepreneurial agential decisions could be thus enhanced by taking intersectionality and positionality into account. In the Anglo-American context, for example, the intersectional structural forces of racism and sexism mean that women of colour's decisions to enter into entrepreneurship may be particularly influenced by negative experiences of employment and institutional discrimination (Healy *et al.*, 2011). Due to intersectionality and positionality, their constellation of concerns include the impact of both racism and sexism (Knight, 2016). Whereas, for white men, it is almost assured that neither racism nor sexism in the workplace would feature highly if at all in their constellation of concerns. In social hierarchies that valorise whiteness and maleness in both employment and

entrepreneurship (Ogbor, 2000; Marlow and McAdam, 2013), their priorities, while varied, would likely be focused on other considerations – remuneration considerations, autonomy, or having more time for family – not the frustrating, dispiriting encounters of racist discrimination and/or sexual harassment that are regular features of the workplace experiences of women of colour (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Such a framework could help to explain the structural trend in which women of colour are the fastest-growing US population of entrepreneurs (Boschma, 2015). Thus, an intersectional perspective enables us to account for the presence or absence of such enabling or constraining social conditions, and the ways in which they affect markets and institutions (Vincent *et al.*, 2014), as relevant factors in experiences of entrepreneurial opportunity pursuit, and social reproduction or transformation. This example is extended in the following section on resources to illustrate how these notions align.

Contextualising Resources

It is generally accepted that resource asymmetry is a key factor in why some people pursue entrepreneurial opportunities and are successful, while others do not and are not (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Haynie *et al.*, 2009). However, this resource asymmetry is not usually contextualised in any meaningful way. Furthermore, traditional entrepreneurship theory holds that it is differences of belief about the value of resources that are a primary source of opportunity (Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001: 756). On this point, within seminal literature, apparent consensus exists: ‘entrepreneurial opportunities exist primarily *because different agents have different beliefs* about the relative value of resources when they are converted from inputs into outputs’ (Schumpeter 1934; Kirzner 1979; Shane and Venkataraman 2000, as cited by Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001, p. 756, authors’ emphasis). Yet, not only are differences of belief about the value of resources significant to opportunity development, but equally important, if not more so, is the ability to access resources themselves. While it is dynamic over time, this access is understood to be unequally socially distributed from birth, and clearly linked to families of origin (Anderson and Miller, 2003; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014). Thus, as social positionality is explicitly concerned with the unequal distribution of resources that entrepreneurship scholars hold are key to success, it offers an important theoretical intervention within the entrepreneurship literature.

Whether or not they are acknowledged to do so, the places occupied by actors in the social order will be crucial to their experiences not only of entrepreneurship, but of all the opportunities available to them. Anthias argues that social positions are characterised firstly by hierarchical difference: ‘a pecking order of places, symbolically and materially’ and

secondly, by unequal resource allocation: ‘concrete access to economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources’ (2001a: 635). Normalised and reinforced over time, what manifests is ‘naturalized, collectivized and relational hierarchization and unequal resource allocation’ (2001a: 635). Integrating a Bourdieuan analysis with intersectional insight, she conceptualises resource allocation as referring not only to economic resources, but also the allocation of power, authority and legitimacy in relation to political, cultural and representational levels, and the different kinds of social and symbolic capital (2001a, p. 635). These material and cultural resources are tied to hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity, and class, as well as many others; however, these three categories are often found ‘at the heart of the social’ (2001b, p. 368), and influence economic opportunities through life chances and resource accrual (Acker, 2006; Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014; Valdez, 2011). Individuals and groups disadvantaged by social positionality on these and other relevant axes will likely have access to fewer economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources, while those advantaged are likely to have easier access; their entrepreneurial activity will doubtlessly be affected as a result. For example, a marginal positionality resulting in a lack of material (e.g. knowledge, networks, funding), and/or symbolic resources (e.g. masculinity, cultural capital), can be expected to both affect entrepreneurial motivations as well as pose structural barriers to the chances of engaging successfully in entrepreneurship. Importantly, this not only applies to individuals, but at higher levels of analysis as well – firms and organisations positioned differently in social hierarchies are, as a result of such positioning, able to access (or not) various resource pools with different values for entrepreneurship; the individual-level analysis then applies to key decision-making individuals within these firms.

Again drawing from Bourdieu (1986), human and social capital theories are popular explanations for the phenomena of opportunity recognition and exploitation (Davidsson and Honig, 2003; McGuirk *et al.*, 2015). Yet, lacking a theoretical framework engaged with social context, their relationship to each other and to entrepreneurship is murky. There is often little acknowledgement of families of origin as the first providers of human and social capital, or how social capital is often generative of human capital (Anderson and Miller, 2003). Anthias stresses the need to conceptually embed a social capital perspective within social hierarchies, and to carefully distinguish between social capital and specific types of resources, such as networks (2007). Devoid of the context of social hierarchies and an associated conception of how unequal resource distribution arises, the capital perspective lacks the scope to address structural issues of marginality or theorise intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression.

For example, scholars interested in the relevance of, say, management experience to entrepreneurial learning (Politis, 2005), should acknowledge that people with disadvantaged positionality face greater barriers to becoming managers (Acker, 2006; Healy *et al.*, 2011). Such a ‘myopic focus on the individual’ (Autio *et al.*, 2014, p. 1059), means that differences in individual experiences are not theorised at a structural level, and the unequal structural distribution of resources are omitted from analyses.

Continuing the example from above, a further class based intersection may be identified – amongst dissatisfied women of colour employees, those from the professional classes may have the accumulated human, financial and social capital accrued over the life course (Jayawarna *et al.*, 2014), needed to identify and pursue a profitable opportunity, while in contrast, those working for minimum wage in the service and retail sector are unlikely to have the same means. Although superficially, their constellation of concerns may appear similar: ‘Should I stay in my job or should I start a business?’ the answers to the following line of questioning in their internal conversation are likely to differ dramatically: ‘How long can I pay rent, bills, eat, and take care of my loved ones, without income?’ Accounting for positionality thus directs us to an understanding of entrepreneurship as not simply meritocratic or neutral, but a deeply unequal process in which the socially privileged tend to be better equipped to take risks and potentially fail (Anderson and Miller, 2003), while for those at the bottom of the pyramid, there may be literally no other economic option (Bruton *et al.*, 2013; Imas *et al.*, 2012). An awareness of positionality is thus essential for an in-depth contextual analysis of the phenomenon, by highlighting who has access to resources and who does not. Intersectionality, as the process which gives rise to positionality, then becomes an explanation for why such inequality exists. These related notions therefore provide important theoretical means for apprehending social context within entrepreneurship studies.

Realist mixed method approaches in intersectional entrepreneurship research

The above arguments have outlined the potential for intersectional thinking to make a significant contribution to understanding social context in entrepreneurship. Yet while such thinking takes complexity as a starting point, how to apprehend that complexity is challenging. The methodological obstacles to intersectionality research are well documented, such as avoiding the additive approach to multiple dimensions of inequality (Bowleg, 2008), and considering how to treat the categories themselves (McCall, 2005). To address such issues, two suggestions are proposed: first, going with the grain of the entrepreneurship field to seek and identify trends, patterns, and tendencies by adopting a tempered realist philosophical stance

on intersectionality, and second, utilising mixed methods approaches to obtain more accurate and nuanced pictures of the phenomena under investigation. Emerging realist perspectives in intersectionality address key methodological challenges – such as those around ontology, epistemology, and agency – so that they may potentially be overcome (Clegg, 2016; Flatschart, 2017; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014; Mussell, 2016). Tempered realist perspectives such as the critical realist approach advocated here are a departure from strong empiricist realism, and as such also benefit the field of entrepreneurship by offering non-deterministic philosophical approaches that attend both to external forces as well as human choice and action (Pittaway, 2005).

Mixed methods is the combined use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, methods, research techniques, concepts or language within a single study (Creswell, 2014; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012). Interest in mixed method approaches has grown in a variety of social science disciplines, including entrepreneurship, as they enable scholars to generate and verify theory in the same study (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012), particularly the kinds of complex social contextual issues discussed here. However, the disparate entrepreneurship and intersectionality literatures are at a type of methodological loggerheads, with quantitative methods predominating within entrepreneurship (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012; McDonald *et al.*, 2015), and qualitative methods within intersectionality. Nonetheless, there is interest from both camps in availing of the benefits of the other approach: qualitative within entrepreneurship (Gartner and Birley, 2002) and quantitative within intersectionality (Dubrow, 2008; Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005). Quantitative studies are appropriate for asking ‘how many’, ‘how often’ and for finding relationships between variables (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012), while qualitative methods can be used to uncover and explain results from quantitative methods, and additionally, offer rich and deep insight into relationships of power and in/equality (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016). Qualitative methods may go some way to offsetting the complication of, or assisting in the explanations for, interaction effects (Creswell, 2014). Consequently, the merging of both quantitative and qualitative methods can benefit not only entrepreneurship literature in general, but in particular the intersectional entrepreneurship studies for which this paper calls.

Barriers and bridges to intersectional approaches

The paper now considers key challenges of undertaking research on intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008; Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014), the interlinked challenges of conducting and publishing mixed methods research (Bryman, 2007), and some

proposed pathways forward. Conceiving of social identities as interdependent and co-constitutive introduces several research challenges, including which intersections to consider, how to measure them, how to analyse and interpret the data (Bowleg, 2008); these challenges also vary considerably based upon whether the data is qualitative or quantitative. However, due to its roots in critical race theory and Black feminism, an intersectional approach is a political commitment, oriented towards social and collective justice (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; Hancock, 2007); as such, the existence of challenges to intersectional research should not impede authentic attempts at producing such knowledge. To that end, some possible suggestions are offered below, and summarised in Table 3.

For qualitative intersectional entrepreneurship research, important intersections to consider may be obvious if one is, for example, researching a (relatively) more homogeneous marginalised population, such as Muslim immigrant businesswomen in Turkey (Essers *et al.*, 2010). In this case, the categories of religion and migrant status are clearly relevant to analyses, so researchers should note that while the American ‘triumvirate’ (Mehrotra, 2010, p. 418) at the heart of the social (Anthias 2001b) – gender, race/ethnicity, and class/socioeconomic status – can be a good place to begin, it may need expanding or adapting for each project. If the population is more diverse, for example, women digital entrepreneurs (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017), it may not be apparent at the start of the project which intersections to consider. In these cases, researchers might adopt a narrative or life history approach to data collection (Cassell and Symon, 2011; Marlow and McAdam, 2012), to encourage participants to share a broad overview of what they perceive shaped their life experiences. This could be combined with a thematic analysis to identify which additional intersections are present in the data and relevant to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Quantitative intersectional research is another emergent area with significant potential. Because of the complexity of each of the elements involved, social science research has to a large extent been divided into separate specialities on gender, race and class (McCall, 2005). However, Else-Quest and Hyde argue that intersectionality can be incorporated at every stage: theory, design, sampling techniques, measurement, data analysis, interpretation and framing. Multiple approaches to conceptualising intersectionality exist, as do several ways to approach the design of intersectional quantitative research; for example, whether there are complex differences and inequalities between groups may be treated as an assumption, or as a hypothesis (McCall, 2005). Some techniques suggested by Else-Quest and Hyde include: ‘framing social categories (e.g., gender and ethnicity) as person variables or as stimulus variables, using a

between-groups design to examine multiple locations at an intersection, stratified random sampling and purposive sampling, and examining how measures demonstrate conceptual equivalence and measurement invariance across groups' (2016, p. 319). While offering valuable suggestions for how to design intersectional data analytic models, such as multiple main effects and interactions, moderators in meta-analysis, multilevel modelling, moderated mediation, and person-centred methods, they caution that these are insufficient without intersectional interpretations that attend to social inequality and power relations (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016).

How to analyse and interpret intersectional data, and ultimately answer the research questions, is the next important challenge, in which the reflexive awareness of the researcher becomes crucial. Poststructuralist feminism identifies individuals as the experts on their own life experiences, such that the researcher's role is not to interpret, but to report these narratives as accurately as possible; this rejection of the interpretative role of the researcher stems from a hermeneutic tradition in which reality is understood to be comprised of 'competing constructions' (New, 1998, p. 358), and the constructions of 'experts' have been unnecessarily privileged (England, 1994). However, a realist perspective identifies room for a suitably sensitized researcher to acknowledge, account for, and explain the perceptions of the participants, as well as call attention to aspects of experience that the individual may not themselves recognise, for subjects are not always necessarily aware of the structures and cultures that constrain and enable them (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014; Vincent *et al.*, 2014). This process of judgmental rationality (Gunnarsson *et al.*, 2016; New, 1998) can use analytical techniques such as field mapping (Vincent *et al.*, 2014), retroduction (Danermark *et al.* 2002), and contrastive explanation (Mussell, 2016). Field mapping uses multiple sources of data such as 'interviews, observation, policy documents, and population statistics' to abduct the 'basic constitution of the field, its cultural forms, business structures, and forms of institutional support (and constraint),' available to the entrepreneur (Vincent *et al.*, 2014, p. 378). Retroductive analysis begins with the question 'What must have happened for X to occur?' followed by the development of theory and the elimination of competing explanations (Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Bygstad and Munkvold, 2011), while contrastive explanation 'seeks to investigate how outcomes sometimes diverge in conditions where we had reason to expect them to be the same' (Mussell, 2016, pp. 545–546).

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While the number of conceptual papers still greatly outnumbers empirical application of these methods, some methodological guidance exists (Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Pawson and Tilley, 1997), some with specific relevance to entrepreneurship (Mole and Mole, 2010; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2018; Vincent *et al.*, 2014). Notably, in contrast to the masculinist, patriarchal history of science where the researcher was assumed to occupy a neutral or ‘God’s eye’ (Haraway, 1988) position, in a realist feminist exercise of judgmental rationality, acknowledging and accounting for the multiplicity and situatedness of all knowers is key (Mussell, 2016) and power differentials between researcher and researched are acknowledged and mitigated as much as possible. Realist intersectional work could furthermore be expected to adhere to the aforementioned three general principles of intersectional research, which include attention to the following: 1. a durable yet dynamic multiplicity of categories of difference, 2. power, privilege, oppression and inequality, and 3. structural and cultural as well as individual-level, agential analyses (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014).

Barriers and bridges to mixed method approaches

Mixed methods approaches lend themselves to complex and multifaceted research questions which seek to understand both social-structural patterns as well as micro-foundational processes, like entrepreneurship (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012) and intersectionality (Grace, 2014). However, there exist additional challenges to the conducting of mixed methods research itself: questions of methodological rigour, and issues of journal acceptance and publication; the paper discusses each in turn. Particularly in business and management studies, mixed methods approaches are rare, and may be criticised for a lack of rigour (Bryman, 2007). Yet it is possible that well-executed mixed method studies are likely to be more, not less, rigorous in terms of their accurate reflection and explanation of the phenomena under consideration. This is due to their reflexive attention to both structural and individual levels of analysis, which some apparently rigorous studies presented in a highly abstract ‘social vacuum’ do not possess. Grace (2014) suggests that to enhance rigour in mixed methods research in intersectionality, researchers should closely attend to four dimensions: the timing of data collection, the weighting of quantitative and qualitative data, when and how the different data types are mixed in the study, and the way in which the study is informed by the theoretical framework and its assumptions.

Three barriers of academic convention inhibit the acceptance and publication of mixed method research in entrepreneurship. First is the tendency of entrepreneurship researchers to focus more on defining their object of study and selection of data collection protocols than on

the underlying philosophical assumptions of their work; these assumptions may be implicit or explicit, and range from hard or soft positivism to constructionism (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012), with little realist work in between (Blundel, 2007). A second but related issue is that as quantitative methods tend to be associated with positivism and qualitative with constructionism, there is a clear methodological rift between camps, which often operate in disciplinary silos that delimit conference streams, academic meetings, and journals; mixed methods approaches are therefore much less common, though they are found to have increased impact in terms of citations (Molina-Azorin, 2012). Yet methodology is more independent from method than is commonly believed; work such as this paper aims to encourage researchers in the field to be more explicit about, and engage with the debates regarding, their ontological and epistemological assumptions. A third issue is that of publication, which is related both to the problem of disciplinary and methodological silos as well as to restrictions of length. The size and complexity of grandly intersectional or mixed methods projects may exceed the scope of a single article (McCall, 2005; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012), and can thus negatively affect possibilities for publication.

One imperfect and individualised solution is to split a mixed methods study into multiple papers covering quantitative and qualitative approaches individually. In addition, novel and emergent approaches, for example, text mining and corpus linguistics (Kedves, 2016; Yuan *et al.*, 2016), may help to combine insights from traditionally disparate methods. Yet, while these suggestions may address some of the challenge of publication, they do not serve to foster the acceptance of mixed methods work in the field. So, from a realist perspective, encouraging individual scholars to pursue mixed methods studies is not sufficient, as this sits in opposition to an academic climate of intense pressure to ‘publish or perish’ (Courpasson, 2013). There is also a need to advocate for increased openness to such approaches at the structural (e.g. sectoral, disciplinary, institutional and academic publishing industry) level as well.

Towards an Intersectional, Mixed Methods, Entrepreneurship Research Agenda

From this discussion of the value of intersectional and mixed methods approaches for entrepreneurship research, a few topical areas emerge. Although not exhaustive, this paper offers a flavour of the kind of novel understandings of social entrepreneurial context that could be produced with such a shift in methodological focus. First, a realist, intersectional conception of agency could expand understanding of the micro-processes of, for example, entrepreneurial intention, new venture creation, and entrepreneurial exit. The quantitative studies that

dominate in this area could be complemented by further qualitative investigation; alternatively, qualitative work could be carried out prior to the design of survey instruments to inform their conceptions of how to account for and measure various intersectional influences, including the privilege and oppression emerging from particular social positionality, upon entrepreneurial decision-making. Population-level statistical analyses on employment and self-employment trends, wealth and poverty could be complemented by qualitative work, such as interviews, focus groups, logs and diary studies (Bolger *et al.*, 2003), on how resource access influences, for example, necessity versus opportunity entrepreneurship (Acs, 2006), business failure (Deichmann and Ende, 2014), and the returns from entrepreneurial activity for various groups, including those located at marginalised or intersectional social positions amongst them (Bruton *et al.*, 2013; Carter, 2011). Such work would both offer deeper insight into the statistical correlations, increasing the potential for causal explanation and bounded generalisability, which would be of benefit to researchers as well as to policy-makers.

Quantitative studies may also incorporate qualitative components, such as open-ended questions, while quantitative components may also be included in broadly qualitative work: for example, interview participants may be surveyed longitudinally. Although the results may not be generalisable to a population, they have the potential to produce more accurate pictures of trends occurring amongst particular sample populations over time than interview data alone. Whether the methods used are concurrent or sequential, in which order, and which mode is emphasised, thus becomes a matter of research design (Creswell, 2014; Grace, 2014; Morse, 1991). Exploratory sequential studies use qualitative followed by quantitative methods, while explanatory sequential studies use quantitative followed by qualitative methods. Table 4 illustrates potential sequencing of methods.

----- TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE -----

With these shifts, there may be expansion in the kinds of questions researchers ask and the populations they include. Recent work has called for attention to a more well-developed and nuanced ‘gender agenda’ in entrepreneurship (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2017), that understands gender as a universal rather than a property of women alone, takes intersectionality as given such that race, gender, and class are central to analyses, and accounts for the existence of further marginalised populations, such as trans, disabled, Global South and ‘bottom of the pyramid’ entrepreneurs (Imas *et al.*, 2012; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2017; Sultana, 2007). Yet, the intersectional perspective advocated here, with its attention to privilege, also holds explanatory power for trends occurring at the top of the pyramid as well (Braguinsky *et al.*,

2012). Finally, it is vital to decolonise the entrepreneurship agenda from its Anglo-American and Eurocentric roots, by explicitly focusing on populations within the Global South and non-Western contexts, and concentrating on the development of theory applicable to those contexts, rather than simply applying Western lenses that are often unfit for purpose (Imas *et al.*, 2012).

Conclusion

The necessity of attention to the social context of entrepreneurship is undeniable, framing as it does the range of actors, activities, and outcomes involved in the phenomenon that have long confounded researchers and blurred the boundaries of the field. Yet existing treatments of social context can be superficial or one-dimensional, and thus unsatisfactory. To advance the conversation, this paper has argued for the value intersectionality and positionality bring to an understanding of social context in entrepreneurship. To operationalise these concepts, it has introduced a tempered realist methodological approach to intersectionality, advocated for mixed methods approaches, and considered apparent barriers and bridges to mixed methods intersectional entrepreneurship research. It thus makes three significant theoretical contributions to the study of entrepreneurial activity: first, it introduces a conceptual framework enabling researchers to begin systematically exploring social entrepreneurial context through overarching intersecting structures such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic class, as well as other relevant dimensions; second, it outlines empirical methods through which researchers might begin to ascertain which social-structural influences are present, and the degree of their impact. Finally, it offers a theoretically informed and methodologically robust means of conceptualising and explaining how social structures and agency meet in the lives of individuals and influence essential aspects of the entrepreneurial process. An intersectional perspective upon entrepreneurship insists that society is neither neutral nor exists in a vacuum; it is made up of social hierarchies across which power, privilege and resources are unequally distributed. It is the challenge of researchers to design and implement novel ways to apprehend this complexity, in order to produce more contextualised, nuanced and ultimately more accurate knowledge of how the social world, in its great variety, shapes and contributes to entrepreneurial activity and outcomes.

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