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A critical realist exploration of entrepreneurship as complex, reflexive and myriad

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on previous studies that explore entrepreneurship from a critical realist morphogenetic perspective, and incorporates the neglected aspect of how agential reflexivity shapes entrepreneurship. Using the morphogenetic framework and its typology of reflexive modes, we analyse 78 work and life histories gathered from Sri Lanka with the aim of understanding reflexive entrepreneurial action. Our findings suggest that, while *autonomous reflexives* match the common understanding of entrepreneurship, i.e. that it is individualistic and wealth-driven, nevertheless the other reflexive modalities also exhibit entrepreneurship. For example, *communicative reflexives* may demonstrate entrepreneurship in achieving their aspiration to maintain a family firm or tradition, and *meta-reflexives* may demonstrate entrepreneurship in order to realize their value ideals. We conclude that the morphogenetic typology of reflexivity is a reliable guide to understanding subtleties associated with entrepreneurial action and resolving the ongoing debate about whether entrepreneurship is best understood as motivated by the individual or by society.

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship; critical realism; morphogenetic approach; reflexivity; Sri Lanka

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to entrepreneurship theory by demonstrating that critical realism can offer useful methodological resources to uncover the subtle nature of entrepreneurship associated with the dialectic of structure and agency. Entrepreneurship is defined throughout scholarly and popular literature in two distinct ways: (1) as a strategic orientation involving innovation and growth ambition that can apply in new and existing organizations (Schumpeter 1934; Wiklund and Shepherd 2003); (2) as new business creation, including new small firms and self-employment (Levie and Lichtenstein 2010; Kelley, Singer, and Herrington 2016). It is the latter definition that we apply in this paper.

Most studies on entrepreneurship have conflated the two definitions, including in the entrepreneurial motivations literature, and so financial growth ambition is assumed in many studies to apply to all types of business generation activities (Wiklund and Shepherd

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2003; Tedmanson et al. 2012). In addition, most studies of the drivers of entrepreneurship are carried out in developed neoliberal economies in cultural contexts that prioritize individualism and material wealth. From these studies, the motivations for entrepreneurship have, at least implicitly, been attributed universally. Yet, such studies have been criticized for over-simplifying the complexity of entrepreneurship-motives, such that even in developed Western economies, entrepreneurship does not follow a uniform pattern of drivers (e.g. Cassar 2007; Jayawarna, Rouse, and Kitching 2013; Block, Sandner, and Spiegel 2015). The present work, therefore, explores entrepreneurship with a focus on observing drivers and practices beyond those normatively ascribed to it.

We empirically explore entrepreneurship through a critical realist lens that emphasizes the usefulness of considering both society and individuals in making sense of the world, based on a 'depth' ontology committed to *emergence* and *stratification*' (O'Mahoney, O'Mahoney, and Al-Amoudi 2017, 782). Particularly, we draw on the realist social theory developed by Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) – the morphogenic approach (MA) – that considers society and individuals to be linked through reflexivity. Individuals are oriented to different reflexive modes with distinct ultimate life concerns and consciously craft their life journeys in diverse ways to satisfy these. In accomplishing a life of their own, individuals may also practice provisional reflexive modes if that enables satisfying ultimate life concerns: a theoretical position that makes the MA a non-deterministic methodological approach (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). Archer thus provides a typology of reflexivity in which she assumes that not all agents approach their lives in the same way. The type of agent most strongly linked with the notion of the 'entrepreneurial personality' (McClelland 1961) or the 'agential entrepreneur' (e.g. Hessels, Gelderen, and Thurik 2008; Mutch 2007) is termed by Archer as possessing autonomous reflexivity (AR). AR is a dominant mode of reflexivity and it is particularly associated with independence, work-orientation and upward socio-economic ambition. However, there are other reflexive modes; and it remains unclear how entrepreneurship is associated, if at all, with those other modalities viz. communicative (CR), meta-(MR) and fractured (FR) reflexivity. In contributing to entrepreneurial theory, the empirical work reported in this paper explores this neglected aspect, demonstrating how modes of reflexivity can offer insights into entrepreneurial motivations. The central research questions addressed therefore are: *What (if any) reflexive modalities as practiced by individuals, are associated with entrepreneurship intention and action? Is variation in entrepreneurship by reflexive modality observable?*

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical context by exploring existing approaches to understanding entrepreneurial action. Thereafter, critical realism and specifically Archer's approach to agential reflexivity in investigating social action will be discussed, followed by a discussion of the limitations of her framework. The methodology employed to observe work and entrepreneurship through a morphogenic lens amongst 78 participants and the research outcomes that emerged are presented in the following sections. The paper concludes with key findings, implications for theory and policy, and recommendations for future research.

Conflated nature of the existing theorizing of entrepreneurship

The literature on intentions and motivations for entrepreneurship action is extensive and constituted by divergent philosophical underpinnings. Most predominant are studies

that position entrepreneurship as based on intention (Kautonen, van Gelderen, and Tornikoski 2011; Bae et al. 2014), underpinned by theories such as Theory of Planned Behaviour and Theory of Reasoned Action (e.g. Carsrud and Brännback 2011; Lee et al. 2011; Lortie and Castogiovanni 2015). These studies tend to be associated with positivistic thinking, examining the cognitive processing of intentions rooted in, and from, a psychological standpoint (Shaver and Scott 1991). Some studies include external antecedents as influencers of intention, but some others omit such structural forces altogether, either way prioritizing agency (e.g. Kolvereid and Isaksen 2006; Yang 2013). As economies fluctuate, so do entrepreneurship levels, though the rate increases when the employment market is weak during recession for instance and varies across nations depending on resource and alternative employment availability. Indeed, the highest rates of entrepreneurship are in the third world (ILO 2019). Despite this, much research suggests that it is individual choices that lead to entrepreneurial intention (Gielnik et al. 2013). Based on the critical realist approach to explanation that is based on ‘fallibility’ (O’Mahoney, O’Mahoney, and Al-Amoudi 2017), we argue alternatively that intention is a fallible concept where economic and structural forces also affect – even mandate – entrepreneurship. Thus, in critical realist terms, those approaches that offer primacy to agency, making structure an epiphenomenon, commit the error of upwards conflation (Leca and Naccache 2006).

Contrary to agency-focused studies that centre on intentions, there have been attempts to understand entrepreneurship from a postmodern/social constructionist (PSC) position that considers reality to be largely shaped by the *social* and proposes that reality is discursively formed through language, texts and discourses (Webb 2006). Anderson (2015) and Karp (2006) for example consider entrepreneurship to be a socially ascribed identity rather than an objective outcome (also Korsgaard and Anderson 2011; Berglund, Gaddefors, and Lindgren 2015). Literature in this area also addresses the social structures, such as race, ethnicity, identity, gender and class, which intersect with entrepreneurship (e.g. Ahl and Marlow 2012; Gill 2014; Martinez Dy, Martin and Marlow 2018). In general, PSC-based studies of entrepreneurship do not address causality or emergence (e.g. Bouchikhi 1993); consequently, a flat ontology is advanced in which structures that may intersect with entrepreneurial action are not theorized in depth, and thus a contextualized understanding of entrepreneurship is absent. Nevertheless, contrary to positivist approaches, PSC-based research acknowledges a richer tapestry of factors that shape entrepreneurial realities in comparison to agency-based approaches. However, the problem lies in empirical PSC studies’ exclusion of individuals’ emergent powers and of the interaction between the environment and individuals’ creativity and proactivity. Therefore, it can be argued that, for critical realists, such studies prioritize the *social* over the *agent* and therefore commit the error of downwards conflation, giving agency epiphenomenal status (Archer 2003).

The morphogenetic approach

Critical realism, that recognizes the ontological status of both structure and agency, is a viable alternative to conflationary theorizing (Leca and Naccache 2006). A fundamental assumption within critical realism is that individual action is shaped by contexts, and in turn, actions shape these contexts – *the double morphogenesis* (Fleetwood 2008). Thus, for entrepreneurship, individuals possess the power to respond to social influence upon their lives, for example, to their economic circumstances, through entrepreneurship,

which, in turn can have dynamic effects on the world around them (Galloway, Kapasi, and Wimalasena 2019).

Double-morphogenesis allows the recognition of unique and independently operating structural, cultural and agential emergent powers and their causal efficacy on each other. It also allows the observation of separate but interconnected roles played by both individual and society in the production of social behaviour (O'Mahoney, O'Mahoney, and Al-Amoudi 2017). The MA proposes that structure and agency are connected through agential reflexivity (Galloway, Kapasi, and Wimalasena 2019). Reflexivity is, 'the mental ability, shared by all people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' - how individuals make sense of, and shape, social situations (Archer 2012, 1). Reflexivity is exercised through an individual's internal conversations which usually begin at an early age (Archer 2007). Archer holds that reflexivity overpowers pre-reflexive habitual behaviour, arguing that individuals are increasingly subjected to complex social situations that demand novel, creative responses. Thus, reflexivity is morphogenetic - that temporally evolves with agent's reflexive engagement with the world (Archer 2012). Archer considers agents are not isolated in their habitual behaviour but rather, are engaged in a reflexive relationship with structural, cultural and agential emergent properties that act as constraints or enablers, which prevail, reproduce or transform over a life course.

Archer's framework demonstrates how individuals' everyday reflexivity can be used to explain the way individuals subjectively mediate the objective social influence upon themselves (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). Diversity in life-journeys results from the variety of involuntary life circumstances and the choices individuals subsequently make. Archer (2007) identifies four different reflexive modes practiced by individuals, which can explain the diversity of life-courses: communicative, autonomous, meta- and fractured reflexivity. Each mode generates a unique patterning of life journey generating different aggregate consequences of social integration, social productivity and social transformation (Archer 2003).

Fractured reflexives (FRs) are identified by Archer, as having under-developed reflexivity; they do not demonstrate a clear pattern of life journey that their having virtually no purposeful action. FRs are unable to have fully developed internal conversations. FRs' 'expressive' than dialogical responses imply that they are more concerned about the current moment rather than governance of their life-course. Their reflexivity is inadequate to extricate themselves from circumstances or to provide purposeful responses to opportunities as they lack the reflexive powers to ensure coordinated self-monitoring (Archer 2007). Yet, communicative reflexives (CRs), autonomous reflexives (ARs) and meta-reflexives (MRs) are observed to claim differently patterned life journeys, effecting clearly different forms of social mobility.

ARs demonstrate strong reflexive powers, individualistic, and oriented to effect 'upward social mobility' (Archer 2012). AR's ultimate life concern relates to 'work', are confident in in self-contained internal conversations resulting direct individual action, strategic towards structural powers and actively effect contextual discontinuity (Archer 2007). The outcome of the practice of autonomous reflexivity, which is highly sensitive to opportunities, is upward social mobility and social transformation. ARs demonstrate a clear vision in life, and their life histories often include eclectic and portfolio careers, based on perceived opportunities and including false starts.

In contrast to ARs, as Archer (2007) demonstrates, CRs reflexively organize their life around family and friends which is their ultimate life-concern, thus actively work at contextual continuity and social immobility. Their internal conversations need completion and confirmation by another (a dialogical partner) prior to action. CRs remain deeply rooted in their natal context, guided by traditional action, actively evade structural and cultural enablements and constraints, reproducing and reinforcing existing social structures. The outcome of the practice of communicative reflexivity, as Archer suggests, is socio-economic immobility.

Archer shows MRs claim further unique life-courses. MRs' ultimate life concerns relate to value commitments, and they develop an ideology and *raison d'être* accordingly. They are critical about their own reflexivity and society, often engage in social critique, and assume a subversive stance towards structural powers, representing a prototype of lateral social mobility. MRs are never fully content to transition their reflexive life-projects into objective 'placements' within the practical sphere, as available occupational outlets often do not satisfy their ideals, resulting in contextual incongruence.

While these four dominant reflexive modalities enable understanding the dynamics involve in the patterning of life-journeys, Archer allows much flexibility in that individuals may shift their initial reflexive orientations in responding to social influence. Individuals also may practice provisional reflexive modes as a response to synchronic and diachronic factors during the course of life (Wimalasena 2017; Wimalasena and Marks 2019). While Archer's morphogenic framework can yield useful insights into contemporary social action, her approach is not without criticism, as discussed below.

Limitations of the morphogenic approach

Archer's framework has been criticized for underplaying 'crucial social factors ... necessary for a more complex and multi-dimensional study of [reflexivity], such as social origins, family socialization, processes of internalization of exteriority, the role of other structure–agency mediation mechanisms and the persistence of social reproduction' (Caetano 2015, 60). Despite the meta-theoretical emphasis of the role of structural/cultural emergent powers, scholars (e.g. Akram and Hogan 2015; Davidson and Stedman 2018) argue that Archer downplays structural influence and pre-reflexive practices upon agency in her empirical analysis. Although, Archer (2012) attempts to redress this issue through her 'relational reflexivity' concept, according to Caetano (2015, 65) it remains a narrow view that 'does not ... add anything substantial to existing understandings of the term ...'. As Elder-Vass (2008) notes, Archer pays little attention to the role of socialization (internalizing process) in relation to differentiated social positioning in her empirical work. Similarly, Mutch (2004, 429) notes that Archer 'has tended to stress a processual approach that is inclined to downplay broader structural considerations': this claim implies that reflexivity is the only mediator between structure and agency and overlooks other mediatory mechanisms such as external conversations people have that might influence personal concerns. However, closer look at Archer's work would suggest that external conversations and other external influences have been explicitly considered in her approach particularly in the case of communicative reflexives who heavily rely on interlocutors, but her work gives more prominence to internal conversations in the case of other reflexive modes.

Further, Archer's (2012), insistence on increasing contextual discontinuity and decreasing routine action within late-modernity appears to draw criticism for neglecting structural and cultural variations in social positioning and social class associated with different individuals. Mutch (2004, 442) claims that 'Archer's laudable desire to ... preserve individual agency seems to have had the impact of tending to stress agency at the expense of the subtle and indirect ways that structure can mediate agency ...'. However, close scrutiny of Archer's (2000, 2003) work, complemented by Bhaskar's initial contribution to critical realism, would suggest that in fact her work is committed to allowing structural and cultural variations to be mapped onto the realist framework. Particularly, structural conditioning and early socialization processes have been comprehensively incorporated in Archer's (2003) early work on the development of the stratified human being concept. In extending Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Action (TMSA), Archer has demonstrated the vital and subtle role both structure and agency play in understanding social action. The concept of analytical dualism not only allows analysts to distinguish between structure and agency, but also to separately investigate, and therefore incorporate, a range of diverse structural, cultural and agential formations. Bhaskar's (2016, 64) formula, which underpins Archer's work, provides an understanding of the formation of social action as a product of social conditioning, circumstances, reflexive deliberation and values (in relation to capacities/capabilities + feasibility).

Furthermore, critical realism's failure to present a robust account of 'gender' seems to endure within Archer's work: critical realism and feminism are at odds (Flatschart 2017). Lockett's (2008:306) assertion that 'Archer's 'sense of self' develops monologically in the private realm through embodied practice in the natural and physical environment' seems to suggest that the morphogenic approach perpetuates this problematic. Flatschart (2017) asserts that, for Archer, the development of the self therefore happens unexposed to society, for example, she does not mention the role played by the primary care giver. In Archer's (e.g. 2003, 2007) framework, for example, personal reflexivity and acquired identities appear to downplay the role of the complex nature of gender. This absence is evident in the question raised by Flatschart (2017, 285): 'Why ... have feminist critiques of oppression not drawn heavily on critical realist metatheory?'. 'Patriarchal othering', that assigns a subordinate position to the 'other gender' – namely woman – has been neglected within critical realist meta-theory that Archer represents (Gunnarsson 2016). Therefore, oppression emerging through 'difference' embedded within structures and cultures and the intersections of multiple oppressive causal mechanisms seem to have been under-played (Martinez, Martin, and Marlow 2014; Flatschart 2017).

The role of 'collective reflexivity', for King (2010:257), seems to have been under-emphasized: 'There is a strange loneliness in [Archer's] sociology where the agent wanders as an isolated figure, engaged in a private conversation'. The stratified view of the subject presented by Archer identifies 'the self – the continuous sense of being one and the same subject – emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness that lasts throughout life' (Li 2010:10). Individuals acquire a personal identity during early stages (the *self* and the *person*) and social identities later (the *agent* and the *actor*) known as the 'social selves', ensuring actors' social becoming (Archer 2003). The development of 'social selves' is shaped by individuals' involuntary life circumstances, social positioning, prior emergence of a continuous sense of self and personal identity

(Archer 2000). While agents are considered naturally collective beings, Archer suggests that they would act collectively if doing so allows accomplishing common aims (Mutch 2004). Yet, as Davidson and Stedman (2018) argue, the collective ability (collective reflexivity) to confront challenges that emerges through individuals in vastly differing circumstances and problematizing such social issues are neglected in Archer's framework. To some extent, Archer's (2012) 'relational agency' concept appears to address the collective agency problem because it suggests that agents, by forming social-relations, may generate emergent powers of 'social bonuses' or 'social evils'. Yet the relationality to oppressive conditions of society is not adequately addressed by Archer (Flatschart 2017).

Acknowledging a morphogenic society in which individual agency is dominant, Archer's analysis seems draw criticism for further neglecting the relevance of collective agency: her approach does not incorporate traditional societies such as Sri Lanka where collective agency is said to be more prevalent. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the work by (e.g. Wimalasena 2017; Wimalasena and Marks 2019) on reflexivity/habitus and women in Sri Lanka has demonstrated that - as collective agency becomes increasingly irrelevant - the continuation of traditional routine practice is increasingly a reflexive task of the individual agent. This suggests that Archer's work, despite such criticism, is a useful methodological approach to study traditional contexts. As proposed by Suddaby, Bruton, and Si (2015), agential reflexivity applies in the domain of entrepreneurship just as it does for any other human potential or activity. Therefore, it is to inspection of entrepreneurship from a morphogenetic perspective, particularly through agential reflexivity, that we now turn.

Critical realism and entrepreneurship

Critical realism and its methodological approach has been examined and applied to the study of entrepreneurship in recent years (e.g. Battilana 2006; Leca and Naccache 2006; Vincent, Wapshott, and Gardiner 2015; Martin and Wilson 2016; Ramoglou and Tsang 2016; Hu 2018). The value of critical realism as a suitable 'vehicle' for the study of entrepreneurship concerns its utility for capturing considerations of context, integrating different levels of analysis, and undertaking enhanced qualitative research (Blundel 2007, p.49). Thus, critical realism provides a notable potential advantage, given the existing conflationary dichotomy present in much entrepreneurship research. As such, a central concept in the study of entrepreneurship, is the recent recognition of the value of agency *in* context. (Mole and Mole 2010; Suddaby, Bruton, and Si 2015; Martin and Wilson 2016; Ramoglou and Tsang 2016). Further, by taking a critical realist position that explores *both* structure and agency as interrelated and contributory to entrepreneurial action, both structural and agential enabling conditions become evident (Martinez Dy, Martin and Marlow 2018; Martinez Dy and Agwunobi 2019). Consistent with this, Vincent and Pagan (2019) address the importance of contextualizing the experiences of entrepreneurs and their reflexive responses. From an entrepreneurial-intentions perspective, Galloway, Kapasi, and Wimalasena (2019) use a critical realist approach to theorize that the value sought from entrepreneurship is reflexively and idiosyncratically defined and may not mandate financial or economic concerns.

In concert with the growing interest in the role of critical realism in studying entrepreneurship, we consider reflexivity to be a valuable lens through which to explore

entrepreneurial intentions in practice in context. Certainly, autonomous reflexivity resonates with traditional interpretations of entrepreneurship, which define it in terms of entrepreneurial psychology (McClelland 1961), driven by agency, and oriented towards proactivity, ambition and opportunity (Mutch 2007). In fact, this obvious resonance between autonomous reflexivity and entrepreneurship echoes classic Schumpeterian notions of entrepreneurship, or as Tedmanson et al. (2012, 532) put it 'unquestioning idealization of the entrepreneur as prototype 'homo economicus'', who is aspirational, risk-taking, extraordinary, progressive and disruptive through on-going creative destruction (i.e. social transformation). Yet, this observation does not describe much of the business experienced throughout the world, since, globally most firms are neither growth oriented nor disruptive (Levie and Lichtenstein 2010; Manolova et al. 2012). Alternative reflexive modalities, we argue, might have some explanatory value. We therefore explore the question: *Which (if any) reflexive modalities – as practiced by individuals – are associated with entrepreneurship intention and action?* The following section outlines the Sri Lankan research context.

Research context: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an apposite context to examine entrepreneurship. Historically based on a feudal, caste-based, self-sufficient, social system, Sri Lanka was under the successive colonial rule of the Dutch, the Portuguese and the British from the early 15th century (De Silva 2005). From the end of colonial occupation in 1948, until 1977, Sri Lanka attempted self-sufficiency (Gunasinghe 2007). Post 1977, a change of government prompted development of an open economy, being the first South Asian country to do so (Arunathilake 2012; Perera 2019). As Perera (2019) notes, prior to 1977, the inward-looking economic policy promoted and supported local businesses. However, after 1977, the open-economy led local businesses to compete with foreign products, services, technology and processes, thereby creating a dynamic, complex business environment. These events have altered the country's culture to mirror Western, market-based socio-economic models, making the private sector the key business player (Jayewardena 2007).

Moreover, while no longer officially recognized, there is tacit acknowledgement throughout Sri Lanka of the perpetuation of notional caste hierarchy (Morrison 2004; Gunasinghe 2007). Conventionally, different castes were assigned with different services rendered to the king, popularly known as 'rajakariya' (De Silva 2005). Different castes specialized in different arts, rituals and trades, some becoming small-scale self-managed businesses eventually, for example, jewellery making, cinnamon peeling, toddy-tapping, laundry, and pottery making (Hussein 2013). While most of these trades were ascribed with low-caste status, some individuals succeeded in becoming renowned entrepreneurs, representing new middle-class, challenging their birth-ascribed identities to some extent (Jayewardena 2007). What has emerged today therefore is the complex coexistence of a traditional social system characterized by agriculture, tradition and caste, and a more modern Westernized market economy-based society typified by social class (Wimalasena and Marks 2019).

According to the Central Bank Sri Lanka (2015), presently, Sri Lanka's population is approximately 21 million and is an emerging economy developing an open market base but without complete financial, regulatory and business infrastructure. 'Sri Lanka has the

14th-largest gender gap in labour force participation globally' (Solotaroff, Joseph, and Kuriakose 2017, 1) – 75% of male and 36% female, and unemployment rates of 3% and 7% (approx) respectively (Perera 2019). Sri Lanka's independent business/self-employment rate has not fallen below 35% of total employment since 1993 and contributed to the fall in average unemployment rates from 15% in 1990 to 4.7% in 2015 according to the World Bank (2017). It is estimated that 90% of Sri Lanka's businesses are sole-ownerships and only 25% of these are owned by women (Sri Lanka Export Development Board 2019). While female participation over the last two decades has been on the rise, statistics regarding Sri Lankan women's entrepreneurship is scarce (Deyshappriya 2019). Yet there are also still half a million people who live on less than \$2 per day and there are high rates of socio-economic inequality (World Bank 2017). Despite this, the population is well-educated with literacy rates above 90%. The Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics (2016) reports that self-employment and independent business account for around 40% of the workforce. While it could be hypothesized that economic factors have led to this high entrepreneurship rate, equally the transition to an open market system along with high levels of education suggest opportunities for those who would exercise their agency to take them. Nevertheless, entrepreneurial behaviour in this unique social context remains under-researched. The following section therefore outlines the methodology employed to explore entrepreneurial behaviour within Sri Lanka based on a morphogenetic standpoint, with a specific focus on answering the questions (1) *What reflexive modalities are associated with entrepreneurial intention and action?*; and (2) *Is variation in entrepreneurship by modality observable?*

Methodology

Since the central purpose was to explore the work-related choices and actions of people that necessarily feature their intentions for entrepreneurship, this study adopts a qualitative methodology. In this way we enhance the study of entrepreneurship by gaining access to 'the subjective and interpretive inner world of the entrepreneur' (Suddaby, Bruton, and Si 2015, 8). Consequently, 78 Sri Lankan individuals from a variety of backgrounds were interviewed about their life and work histories. As there was no formal categorization of occupations except for the general understandings of low, medium and higher level jobs in Sri Lanka, the participants were sourced using the eight occupational-classes recognized within National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) which provided a formal basis upon which to map participants from an income/social status basis (Chisnall 2004). Therefore, participants were not chosen because they were entrepreneurs but because they represented a cross-section of the contemporary occupational landscape of Sri Lanka. Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, through the personal network of one of the researchers, with a purposeful bias to engage a wide range of Sri Lankan social life. Participants therefore included men and women of various ages, from urban and rural locations, and across a broad range of work activities including entrepreneurship. In the absence of overt markers of recognition and classification, identifying participants' caste proved difficult. Due to ethical and customary reasons, participants were not directly asked about their caste, but some openly identified/admitted their caste identity during the interview. Summary details of the range of participants are given in Table 1.

Each participant took part in a biographical narrative interview, based on a pre-designed interview guide, that encouraged narrative life histories about how respondents arrived in their current situation and their future ambitions and expectations. Complying with the morphogenetic tradition, to facilitate identifying participants' work and life-strategies and reflexive orientation, the interviews included nature of life concerns, socio-economic background, education and experience, work choices, life's challenges (structural/cultural constraints), life expectations and internal conversations. Entrepreneurship emerged as a 'work identity' and experience without direct search for it, reiterating the established technique within the wider social sciences, allowing results to emerge, rather than attracting attention to them that might result in over-reporting (Reah 1982). The current study considered explicit focus on entrepreneurship as leading and risking participants reflecting on cultural and social attitudes, rather than their personal, reflexive position on it. As a result, life histories related in participants' own words – *their* stories from *their* perspective – emerged (Duff and Bell 2002), which afforded capturing intentions and experiences of entrepreneurship and understanding of the relationship between these and reflexivity.

The interviews were conducted in either *English* or *Sinhala* (later translated to *English*). The resulting narratives were coded in NVivo software based on the themes of the interview guide. Thereafter, a loose and flexible thematic approach was used in the data analysis allowing both the themes generated by participants' own narratives as well as emerging themes within life histories to be captured (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The analysis consisted of a two-stage process: (1) identifying the reflexive orientation of each participant, using a set of criteria developed based on Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) work on reflexive modalities, and (2) understanding how the participants confront life-challenges (structural and cultural powers) by subjectively forming work-related life projects reflecting ultimate life concerns. This approach to data analysis allowed for capturing both anticipated and emergent sub-themes and for these to be presented via example cases.

Research outcomes

Evidence of entrepreneurship or plans for it were observed amongst half of the sample (39 of the 78 participants) as per Table 2, which also shows reflexive modalities observed. The range is revealing – there is no clear type of entrepreneur and neither is there any social or demographic feature that precludes it. The reflexive modality of each participant, and the fact that this varies, bears this out. While 23 participants were identified as ARs (the modality most resonant with established Western entrepreneurship thought), a further 16 participants were either meta- or communicative reflexives associated with entrepreneurship (none of the three fractured reflexives were nascent or established entrepreneurs).

Interview data provided rich evidence of the life and work histories, including reasons for entrepreneurship. The following sections illustrate how the reflexive modes manifest in relation to entrepreneurship using example vignettes representative of each reflexive mode. The examples used were selected to showcase diversity from each other in some way (for example to represent both genders or diverse socio-economic groups), and on the quality and clarity of testimony provided.

Table 1. Participant attributes.

N = 78

Age	18–29	15			30–49	40		50–70	22		70+	1												
Sex	Male	56						Female	22															
Locale	Urban	31						Rural	47															
NS-SEC	1 (Higher-managerial and professional)	14		2 (Lower-managerial and professional)	13		3 (Intermediate)	11		4 (Small-employer)	4		5 (Lower-supervisory/technical)	6		6 (Semi-routine)	8		7 (Routine)	14		8 (Un-employed)	8	
Caste	higher	4					medium	18		lower	5												not known	51

Table 2. Entrepreneurship/non-entrepreneurship by reflexive mode ($N = 78$).

Reflexive-Mode & Entrepreneurship	Autonomous Reflexivity	Communicative Reflexivity	Meta-Reflexivity	Fractured Reflexivity	Total
Entrepreneur	8	4	8	–	20
Nascent entrepreneur	15	2	2	–	19
Total entrepreneur	23	6	10	0	39
Sex					
Male	17	5	8	–	30
Female	6	1	2	–	09
No entrepreneurship	14	12	10	3	39
TOTAL	37	18	20	3	78

Autonomous reflexivity

Table 2 shows that amongst the 37 participants identified by life history analysis as exhibiting autonomous reflexivity, 23 (nearly two-thirds) were either established or nascent entrepreneurs. These AR entrepreneurs also comprised more than half of the total entrepreneurial population in the sample. *Ruchira*, and *Kamani's* stories below illustrate their reflexive orientation to life and work as well as entrepreneurial experiences and aspirations.

Ruchira's story

Ruchira is a 39-year-old chartered accountant employed as a partner in a leading audit firm and also co-owns several other business ventures including a clothing business that he runs with a close friend. He comes from a privileged land-owning family from a rural village. He considers 'work' as his ultimate life concern, a dominant feature of ARs, as established by Archer. *Ruchira* began his professional life as an audit trainee and progressed through his career as an accountant, then a financial controller, to his present situation as a partner in an audit firm. Education for him has been a stepping-stone to the business world. Alongside this, *Ruchira* has formed several businesses, some of which have been successful while some failed. He asserts that his aim in life is to be a successful entrepreneur and thinks his hard work in education, being a qualified accountant, is an investment for a successful future in the business world. He enjoys developing new business ideas which is a life-long interest. For example, below is a quote from his interview that represents how his entrepreneurial intention formed:

... at the beginning ... the idea of starting my own business worked in my mind ... I was thinking, I wouldn't do a job but will create my own. When I was working in the audit firm, I gathered information about doing business and filed the documents that would be required for me to start a business, about business loans and other information ... I even went to meet people to discuss doing business at the Industrial Development Board. It was about rubber and coir mattresses. In our village we have both coir and rubber ... I had an idea about entering into such a venture even from those days.

Kamani's story

Less well-off and with little education, *Kamani's* story is somewhat different, yet her entrepreneurialism is expressed via an AR modality. Originating from a rural family of high

caste, *Kamani*, a packer in a factory, decided to move to Colombo (Sri Lankan capital) aged 16 to work. Demonstrating what Archer has recognized as strategic sensitivity among ARs, *Kamani* decided to activate her life journey dedicated to work very early in life:

I put a false age and got a job in a garment factory ... At the beginning ... it was very difficult to spend the day, no freedom, you must work at the machine from 7am to 7pm, with almost no break.

Despite the harsh conditions, *Kamani* was driven. Now married, she describes her current ambitions that reflects her entrepreneurial intentions:

... What I want is to succeed in life ... and to live a happy life. My mother-in-law asked me to give up work, but I don't like to let only my husband work, I want to work too, and I want to succeed ... I told my husband 'let's open a small grocery-shop. I have collected some money'. There are no other shops in the area and it is a good opportunity. I am planning to stop this job and get it started by January.

In addition to the two cases summarized here, common to all the AR participants is their orientation to assess success in terms of upward social mobility based upon material wealth. The means by which they expect to achieve this is through education and work, and this is characteristic of ARs according to Archer (2007, 2012). Consequently, what is suggested is a clear link between entrepreneurial intention, classic ideas about entrepreneurship and autonomous reflexivity. ARs' focus is to succeed, effect socio-occupational upward mobility, accumulate material and financial wealth, and to strategically mediate structural and cultural constraints. In the case of nearly two-thirds of the ARs identified, these life goals and orientations are being developed through entrepreneurship.

Communicative reflexivity

Table 2 shows that one third of the identified CRs demonstrate entrepreneurship. Conforming to Archer's findings regarding CRs, this sub-group tends to reproduce existing social structures effecting contextual continuity, through sustaining family values and traditions. Therefore, unique to this subgroup is a tendency to continue with the family business. Unlike those of other reflexive modes, the CRs' intentions for entrepreneurship are a conscious extension of their familial concerns. The stories of *Millawana* and *Duncan* illustrated below are clear examples of CRs' intentions to do business in ensuring contextual continuity.

Millawana's story

Millawana (58) is the owner-manager of a *kalayathanaya* – a traditional small-scale arts institute, run by his family. He notes the importance of family and tradition as below:

I am married to a lady whose lineage also descends from a very traditional background (same caste) ... We try to recruit our lamai (children) of the traditional lineages to our *kalayathanaya* [and] teach them our skill and art ... we believe these children will continue our traditions and the art that come from our lineages.

Millawana's entrepreneurship is driven by his desire to retain tradition, which is only possible by reproducing the traditional social context by socio-cultural values and

artefacts inherent to his caste. Thus, entrepreneurship for him is a life strategy he reflexively employs in holding his family and traditions together, that will enable continuation of obligatory family duties of drumming and dancing, inherent to his (lower) caste.

Duncan's story

Duncan, 38, is a co-owner of a leading medium scale family printing company. *Duncan* inherits many social bonuses stemming primarily from his wealthy, business family background, and a privileged education. He is the youngest of three brothers. When *Duncan* was a child his father withdrew from the business after becoming ill following the loss of and damage to several properties during the July riots of 1983. These caused the family to suffer serious financial, social and emotional setbacks. *Duncan's* eldest brother rebuilt the business and the reputation of the family. Encouraged by his brother, *Duncan* pursued education with a view to joining the business.

My father gave up ... after we lost a lot of businesses ... Then I committed myself totally to education and that was the request from my brother ... He wanted me educated and experienced in our business. He convinced me that education would be my future investment for the family.

These have been the prime objectives of *Duncan's* life since his childhood, and he has never had any intentions towards work other than to join with his brothers in claiming back their family business and requisite status. Reiterating what Archer has identified in relation to CRs, who are committed to family, the sole purpose of *Duncan's* life appears to be about achieving his family's intentions:

I was keen to do good for the family, that's what I always wanted to do. I committed whole my life in educating myself and gaining experience in the family business even from my childhood.

Duncan, who is single, awaits while his family finds him a suitable bride who will identify with their family status. Today, *Duncan* appears to be highly contented having contributed to his family's efforts to rebuild the business. His life history suggests, success for him is to conform to family's expectations in terms of work, marriage and responsibilities, and stay with family: his entrepreneurship is based on achieving these.

These examples illustrate entrepreneurship can be a life strategy for those exhibiting communicative reflexivity. Critically though, this seems to only be the case if that ensures contextual continuity. Conforming Archer's observations, that they respect, accept and continue traditions, the present findings suggest CRs may become entrepreneurs particularly when doing that is the family tradition or to enact contextual reproduction. This finding sits in opposition to the existing normative notions of entrepreneurship and 'the entrepreneur'.

Meta reflexivity

Entrepreneurship was also found among meta-reflexives (10 of 20 participants - see [Table 2](#)). For meta-reflexives, entrepreneurship appears to be driven by their ultimate life concerns that relate to value ideologies. A further observation is that this sub-group also includes the most accomplished, successful and established participants in this study.

Shafeeq's story

Shafeeq (44) comes from an affluent family that owns one of Sri Lanka's largest privately-owned businesses. Despite his proximity to entrepreneurial business, *Shafeeq's* biography demonstrates the characteristics of classic meta-reflexivity. *Shafeeq* has had the rare opportunity to experience many local and international career prospects, highly educated and has started several ventures alongside his work in the family business. *Shafeeq* clearly expresses that his main ambition in his life is to serve his country through economic contribution. His life-history provides many examples that conform to Archer's assertion that MRs find constant contextual incongruence due to the mismatch of their concerns and contexts and that they engage in a social critique, that has shaped his business activities: for example, he states:

I ... realise that we have an extremely flawed educational system, and I think that it will take a whole generation to fix.

Shafeeq critically observes that the country lacks an innovative human resource base. He finds it an uphill struggle to develop human resources for his own companies. *Shafeeq* criticizes the national systems for Sri Lanka's future and development, and states, they are flawed, corrupt and lazy. He deliberates that values and attitudes of people are limiting prosperity. *Shafeeq* has created a training centre focused on offering employees educational opportunities both short-term and long-term to improve skills and innovative capacity. Further conforming to Archer's findings on meta-reflexivity, *Shafeeq's* biography evidence that his societal concerns take priority over his personal circumstances. Rather than personal wealth or achievement as the drivers of his entrepreneurship, as a stakeholder in an already successful firm, *Shafeeq* is driven instead by the social and economic contributions his businesses might make, in line with his value commitment. His aim is to be instrumental in reorienting the existing social and cultural order and he remains hopeful.

Padma's story

Padma (40), lives in a rural village with her elderly mother and is a self-employed small-scale moneylender. *Padma* has been able to save a small amount of money through employment as a housemaid in the Middle East. She emphasizes that in her society a woman who works as a housemaid is very low status, but her poverty left her with no option. *Padma* has no intention of getting married, which makes her unusual in rural Sri Lanka where the cultural norm is that women marry and have children, conforming to the social norms of 'good girl, good woman, loyal wife and family honour' (Wimalasena and Marks 2019). During the interview, she attempted to explain the difficulties she confronts in being a single woman:

There are many rumours spread by the villagers ... about me going out of the village and earning money by misbehaving ... There are situations where I almost felt like committing suicide, they have subjected me to that much of harassment.

Despite such harassment, *Padma* continues to live a life committed to her ideals of moral worth. She regards money lending as a service to her community, rather than an occupation, and stresses that she does not do it to make personal profit. *Padma* expresses

her disapproval of those who pursue lives driven by materialism and expresses her indifference about possessions by emphasizing, one day everyone will die leaving all they have earned behind them:

I would associate with someone for my happiness, not for money ... I have enough freedom to do as I like, but I don't misuse my freedom.

Padma thinks her vocation gives her independence, which is her main focus. She has abandoned several occupations in the past, as they did not support her values, incurring significant social costs. Demonstrating what Archer notes in relation to MR's inclinations towards religious, philosophical and philanthropic behaviour, as well as critical stance taken towards the social world, *Padma* is critical of society and appears to be moving towards a religious and philosophical *modus vivendi*.

... the path I tread on is correct ... I am very independent, and I do not become a burden to others.

In *Padma's* case, entrepreneurship has enabled her to mediate the constraining socio-cultural conditions in which she lives and secures her value commitment of being independent resisting patriarchal expectations.

The life and work histories of the MR participants in this study, such as *Padma* and *Shafeeq*, demonstrate that they continually attempt to find idyllic occupational and social outlets to live out their value ideals. The 10 MRs in this study who are entrepreneurs, or aspire to be, do so as an ideologically-driven response to social circumstance, which to an extent resonate with 'social entrepreneurship' (Dempsey and Sanders 2010).

Discussion

As an alternative to conflated conventional approaches to understanding the drivers of entrepreneurship that prioritize either environmental or individual factors, we have outlined a non-conflationary approach that explores entrepreneurship as emergent from individuals' reflexive responses to socio-cultural influence upon their lives. Using a critical realist morphogenetic framework, that considers the inevitable role played by both structure and agency in understanding social action (O'Mahoney, O'Mahoney, and Al-Amoudi 2017), the study reported here sought to engage with the central questions: *What (if any) reflexive modalities as practiced by individuals, are associated with entrepreneurship intention and action?*; and *Is variation in entrepreneurship by modality observable?*

In response to these, we note that amongst the entrepreneurial intentions or behaviour observed in this study, there are participants exhibiting three of the four dominant reflexive modes proposed by Archer (2007). Autonomous reflexivity, which represents the greatest number of entrepreneurs in this study, fits with traditional theory on entrepreneurship that individuals are driven by a work orientation and pursuit of wealth (e.g. Mutch 2007). This individualistic, wealth-seeking *raison d'être* along with the commitment and passion exemplified in the testimonies of *Ruchira* and *Kamani* underpin conceptualizations of the agential entrepreneur.

A unique finding in this study is that entrepreneurship was observed amongst individuals practicing reflexive modalities alternative to the individualist and materially aspiring autonomous reflexivity, demonstrating the advanced methodological potential vested in

the realist morphogenetic framework. In this study, entrepreneurial action or intent was evident both in CR and MR participants. In these cases, entrepreneurship seems less about aspiration to amass material wealth. Instead, the drivers seem to be about aspiration to the idiosyncratic outcomes peculiar to these modalities, for example, CRs to maintain a family firm or tradition, ensuring contextual continuity, or a fulfilling option or a conducive context for MRs to realize their value ideals. Thus, the study demonstrates, the ontological account of 'agency' in critical realism, supplemented by 'agential reflexivity' and 'emergence' as offering novel insights into entrepreneurship theory.

The CR entrepreneurs in this study included a high representation of those who strove to join a family firm. Exemplified by *Duncan*, this seems to reflect the long-held high incidence of independent business in the Sri Lankan work landscape, represented by intergenerational businesses. CR entrepreneurs are inspired to continue and maintain the family firm, rather than driven by purely economic intent. For other CRs, motivators were more akin to those exemplified by *Millawana*, whereby entrepreneurship is a vehicle in which traditional social norms e.g. continuation of caste-specific trades, can be disseminated with the purpose of maintaining rather than developing or transforming them.

Diverging from the notional aspirational entrepreneur also were the MRs observed in this study. Exemplified by *Padma* and *Shafeeq*, for these entrepreneurs, an ideological drive was evidenced, that to a certain extent can explain the conditions for 'social entrepreneurship' and philanthropy where societal concerns take priority over profit motives (Dempsey and Sanders 2010). Worthy of note, this group of participants also included the most established and successful entrepreneurs among all participants. *Shafeeq's* story was illustrative of this. *Shafeeq's* ambitions, facilitated by his entrepreneurship, are associated with building capacity amongst Sri Lankan workers as he plays out his value ideals of developing the economic welfare and orientation of the country. For *Shafeeq*, the drivers for entrepreneurship are not to create a financially lucrative company – he already has that. Instead, his drive is to use his entrepreneurship as a source of resource and power from which to pursue his ambitions. Further, this study finds, demonstrated by meta-reflexive *Padma*, entrepreneurship is also a means of resisting gendered discrimination and oppression, and attempting emancipation.

In understanding entrepreneurship over a life course and even inter-generationally this is a potentially useful outcome of the use of the MA. Beyond the dominant reflexive modalities, the MA holds that reflexivity is morphogenetic – it evolves over a life course as it is informed by and informs circumstances (Galloway, Kapasi, and Wimalasena 2019). Findings such as those relating to *Shafeeq*, where success and wealth have been achieved already, suggest an effect on reflexive modality. Congruent with this, it would be interesting to study the reflexive modalities of entrepreneurs before and after establishing businesses and throughout careers and to observe if, when and how an individual's reflexive mode transitions. From an entrepreneurship perspective in particular, there appears a logical proposition that where autonomous reflexivity might drive some entrepreneurship, as material ambitions are achieved and as entrepreneurial careers mature, the reflexive modality of an agent may evolve into meta-reflexivity as they cease to be driven principally by material expectations and start to find other *raison d'êtres*. This may well contribute to the discourse on entrepreneurial philanthropy and entrepreneurship amongst older generations, and further research on this may be revealing.

Implications for theory and practice

This paper makes six key contributions. First, this study finds, critical realism with its emphasis on agential reflexivity, is a useful and significant development in how we understand entrepreneurial intention and action. Based on a morphogenetic position that holds agential reflexivity as its core, this research has allowed for the richness of the complex intersection of individual and society to illustrate that entrepreneurship can be found across different reflexive modalities. We propose therefore that an analysis of the reflexivity of agents is useful in understanding entrepreneurship and can contribute to entrepreneurship theory.

Second, our study affords a theoretical position in which common neoliberal ideas about entrepreneurship as individualistic, agency-based and opportunity-oriented are supported, but allows for novel insights through other types and drivers of entrepreneurship too. The reflexive modalities do therefore provide a (realist) framework whereby explanations on how and why different types of entrepreneurial motivation might be exposed and explored, and indeed, these may vary by culture and other circumstances of the individual and society. We argue therefore that entrepreneurship explained and understood simply as financial opportunity-driven or financial value-creating, as per ARs, limits understanding of the range and complexity of drivers of action. Instead, we suggest there are several forms of value created through the pursuit of entrepreneurship and these are person-dependent, contextual, and emerge from the practice of different reflexive modes.

Third, as per Suddaby, Bruton, and Si (2015) we move away from an either/or position on objectivity/subjectivity in entrepreneurship research and propose, ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the MA as providing a viable non-conflationary basis for understanding entrepreneurial action. Different reflexive modes, including the practice of 'interim or provisional reflexive modes' (Wimalasena 2017) allow further depth of analysis as individuals subjectively mediate the objective social influence upon their lives. Of these modes, we speculate that the (un)actualized propensity of the classic Schumpeterian entrepreneur is likely to exhibit autonomous reflexivity and theorize communicative and meta-reflexives are also capable of entrepreneurial action but for different reasons. As such, we propose that the morphogenetic framework can provide a meta-theoretical grounding that has much promise in guiding new conceptualizations and understandings of the *why* of entrepreneurship.

Fourth, besides its theoretical contribution to established understandings of entrepreneurship, this research has provided some evidence from the non-western context of Sri Lanka, and as such contributes insightful data on the phenomena of entrepreneurship as practiced by diverse actors in diverse environments.

Fifth, this work redresses the lack of engagement of the morphogenetic framework, particularly, reflexivity, with gender in empirical studies. By using selected life histories of female participants, the paper contributes in demonstrating how entrepreneurship is associated with gendered disadvantage and becomes a reflexive life-strategy in resisting oppression and enabling emancipation. Thus, the paper, contributes to the theory of reflexivity from a feminist position.

Finally, from a policy perspective, the study has implications too. Better understanding of the context of entrepreneurship, whether in an emerging or developed economy, will inform policy and support of it. An understanding of the different modes of and rationales for entrepreneurship amongst those engaged in, or aspiring to it, will also inform policy

and support efforts. Current policy and support are informed by the assumed financial value sought. This research identifies, for some this is the case – most notably support and policy underpinned by this may be useful for ARs. However, since CRs and MRs are not necessarily economically driven, instead prioritizing cultural and/or social congruity and ideological goals respectively, policy need to be appropriately tailored so that encouragement and support of these business endeavours is most effective. In short, to support success, interventions must be cognizant of how ‘success’ is defined by an entrepreneur. That is, interventions should meaningfully engage in the support of the realization of the value sought. From there, policy and support may realize value potential as it is variously sought by individuals, and in turn, extract best economic or social return.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to our understanding of entrepreneurship motivations and the importance of considering the interconnected yet unique influence of both structure and agency in the formation of entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the study reported here has some limitations. First, it is entirely qualitative; therefore, no inference can be drawn about the scale of representation of the different reflexive modalities observed. Nevertheless, we were able to draw on rich life and work history data and could therefore explore the idiosyncrasies of agents’ experiences and use these to illustrate the relationship between structure and agency. This leads to a further limitation though. While 39 established or nascent entrepreneurs were identified via the analysis of 78 life and work histories, the richness of the data obtained allows for only example testimony to illustrate findings. Further limitation is expressed in terms of the reflexive modalities themselves. The modalities are only guidelines and thus are subject to variations of synchronic and diachronic structural, cultural and agential properties that affect each individual differently. Thus, while we endorse the MA as a useful lens through which to expose the nuances and diversity of entrepreneurship in and over time, we do not preclude the possibility that other reflexive modalities exist; or that reflexivity is mutable, because the roles and identities of people can and do vary and influence how we engage within different contextual circumstances.

Despite these limitations, we argue that our empirical study of entrepreneurial drivers suggests that researchers can use realist morphogenesis and Archer’s morphogenetic typology of reflexivity to achieve a richer understanding of the entrepreneurship that we see around us. Better understanding of these diverse phenomena, including understanding of who does entrepreneurship and why, has policy and research value, and as such is meritorious of further research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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