



Entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts: An introduction and review of the literature

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Abstract

This special issue editorial reviews the literature on entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts, highlighting existing research and discussing future outlooks. It centres around the paradox of embedded agency and how this concept has influenced our understanding of the relationship between entrepreneurial agency and contexts through the application of various methodological and empirical settings. In so doing, we contribute to the essential question of entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts, drawing attention towards variable contextual specificities that filter internal and external structures thereby, influencing the way and

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degree to which entrepreneurial agency manifests itself. By reviewing the extant literature on entrepreneurial agency and showcasing highlights of the five manuscripts included in the special issue, this editorial contributes to literature by proposing three complementary perspectives on constrained entrepreneurial agency including *agency in constrained contexts*, *constrained positions in context and interpretations and enactments of constraints in contexts*. These three perspectives draw upon important conceptual, empirical and methodological issues and stress the need for more critical entrepreneurship research that expands our understanding of constrained entrepreneurial agency around external structural constraints, imposed positions of the individual or groups of entrepreneurs within contexts, or individual interpretations and enactments based on meanings, discourses and cognitions that shape experiences, respectively.

Keywords

agency, constrained, contexts, critical research, entrepreneurship

Introduction

This editorial explores entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts and the challenges entrepreneurs face when trying to enact new ventures, livelihoods or structural transformations amid the multiple constraints of their contexts (Edwards et al., 2016). Our focus follows from the significant representation of constrained contexts as part of the diverse phenomenon of entrepreneurship which yet, demands further theoretical grounding, particularly with regards to value and value for whom (Welter et al., 2017). Without an adequate examination of such issues, the field is limiting itself from recognising the important role of agency within the multiple constraints that entrepreneurs navigate (Al-Dajani et al., 2023; Harima, 2022), and the variety of ways in which entrepreneurship unfolds (Baker and Welter, 2024). By focusing the majority of entrepreneurship research on the heroic perception of the entrepreneur (Essers et al., 2023; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019), or high growth enterprises in normative contexts (Baker and Welter, 2024), not only are we confining the field to an unrepresentative 1% of gazelles and unicorns, but are also using such representations as reference points against which examples of more constrained entrepreneurship are treated as comparative passive recipients. The latter has had serious consequences in generating dichotomies in the field, to an extent that some examples of entrepreneurship became excluded for being less or non-entrepreneurial, merely because they do not fit within the common conceptions of high growth tech-driven enterprises (Pahnke and Welter, 2019; Welter et al., 2017).

Through our focus on entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts, this editorial stresses the essential ‘paradox of embedded agency in which structurally embedded agents are able to introduce structural change’ (Kholeif and Jack, 2019: 61). We explore entrepreneurial agency from a position in which entrepreneurs are not viewed as captives of institutional constraints, but act with conviction to contemplate various resources and structures and create spaces where they can gain upward social mobility. Additionally, we also seek to understand the gravity and importance of contexts in shaping entrepreneurial agency – creating paths of enablement and paths of resistance to this agency – in recognition of the extraordinary challenges that face many entrepreneurs seeking to overcome vulnerability, poverty, oppression, marginalisation, stigma and institutional instability.

This special issue contributes to understanding how structural changes happen through the enactment of entrepreneurial agency. We acknowledge the contextualised nature of entrepreneurial agency, which can be hindered or promoted within various contextual specificities that are the outcome of interactions between both internal agential structures, and external structural limitations

and promoters. To elaborate on this view, the editorial proposes three complementary perspectives on constrained entrepreneurial agency including *agency in constrained contexts*, *constrained positions in context and interpretations and enactments of constraints in contexts*. We do so – not in the hope of providing any conclusive, nor mutually exclusive, theorising, but to elevate and substantiate the perspectives offered on this essential question in the special issue articles.

In terms of structure, the editorial offers an overview of the themes and articles in the special issue, as well as gives a cursory overview of the landscape of ideas that exist in the field and in the special issue around the complex phenomenon of entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts. Consequently, the editorial calls for more critical understanding of entrepreneurial agency to acknowledge its multi-faceted nature, and engage not only with binary distinctions such as micro–macro levels, but to dive deeper into the fundamental onto-epistemological aspects of agency in, through and for contexts.

What is constrained entrepreneurship? And why is it important to focus on constrained contexts when exploring entrepreneurial agency?

In some sense, all entrepreneurship is constrained. No entrepreneurial context provides all the resources and structures that any given entrepreneur would desire. The intense lobbying and political activity seen, for example, in the USA suggest that even the wealthiest tech entrepreneurs consider their entrepreneurial agency to be constrained by problematic structures, whether related to regulation or market access (Costa et al., 2024). In relative terms, however, the context of the Silicon Valley-born tech entrepreneurship has been the envy of entrepreneurs and policymakers across the globe for decades – highlighting the point that constraints are always relative. While subject to variations in establishing objective differences, relative constraints of contexts are of essential importance to understanding entrepreneurial agency. When examining constrained entrepreneurship, it is thus, essential to emphasise that the aim here is not to propose constrained entrepreneurship as a distinct and objective category in the field, but rather to note the specificity of contexts in shaping the experiences of entrepreneurs. In other words, we are talking about entrepreneurship that happens in constrained contexts, where those contexts are produced and re-produced through structure–agent interactions.

Research exploring entrepreneurship in constrained contexts has gained momentum over the past few years. Examples can be drawn from research on refugee entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani et al., 2023; de la Chaux and Haugh, 2020; Harima, 2022; Refai et al., 2018, 2024a), rural entrepreneurship (Elkafrawi et al., 2022; Gittins et al., 2022; Korsgaard et al., 2015; Müller and Korsgaard, 2018; Refai et al., 2024b), gender and entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Owalla, 2021), ethnic minority entrepreneurship (Edwards et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2017; Villares-Varela et al., 2022), necessity entrepreneurship (Garcia-Lorenze et al., 2018; O'Donnell et al., 2021), poverty entrepreneurship (Anderson et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019), entrepreneurship in developing/ emerging countries (Abuhussein and Koburtay, 2021; Zayadin et al., 2022), entrepreneurship in conflict (Althalathini et al., 2020, 2021; Haloub et al., 2022) and post-conflict zones (Williams et al., 2023), entrepreneurship in times of crisis (Doern et al., 2019; Williams and Vorley, 2017), prison entrepreneurship (Baur et al., 2018; Brehmer et al., 2024; Hwang, 2022), among others. Despite the growing interest in research into constrained contexts, this research remains largely focused on exploring structures and resources, the various intersections in which entrepreneurs are embedded, and how those hinder or promote entrepreneurship, rather than stressing how agency is operationalised in these contexts and what role it plays in affecting change and growth (Brändle

and Kuckertz, 2023; Elkafrawi et al., 2022; Harima, 2022; Ram et al., 2017; Refai and McElwee, 2023; Villares-Varela et al., 2022). This gap signifies the importance of this editorial through exploring entrepreneurial agency and its role in countering the less-than-optimal interest in constrained contexts (Korsgaard, 2020).

Here, it becomes appropriate to introduce our definition of constrained entrepreneurship in more critical terms, where we define it as entrepreneurship that takes place in contexts which present diverse and challenging structures – relative to other contexts or other positions in contexts – that constrain the ability of entrepreneurs to act, where such structures can be both external and/or internal. On the one hand, external structures relate to either uncontrollable conditions resulting from independent causal influences that are beyond the agent's desire or capacity – such as general economic frameworks or political parties, or irresistible causal influences that agents might have some influence upon, but may feel unable or unwilling to influence (Stones, 2005). On the other hand, internal structures relate to dispositions and knowledge of agents, which are 'virtual and exist only in memory traces' (Coad et al., 2015: 157). Such structures transpire through experiences, values and beliefs about life, which influence an agent's judgements and decisions, and also through specific knowledge and resources that agents gain and draw upon in specific contexts, but potentially not in others where they might not be relevant. Indeed, the ability of entrepreneurs to act and employ their agency becomes more challenging in constrained contexts, whereby agent actions are significantly limited by challenging internal and/or external structures. Notably, it may also be in such constrained contexts that entrepreneurial agency has the most potential for creating positive transformational change.

Three complementary perspectives on constrained entrepreneurial agency

Agency is a reflection of an individual's ability to contemplate daily life conditions and act to change the circumstances (McMullen et al., 2021). In the context of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial agency can be seen as a transformation of structures through entrepreneurial actions that preserve, modify or challenge those structures to achieve some valued outcome, including profit gaining, upward social mobility and social, environmental, cultural or community value to name some of the objectives that are manifest in entrepreneurship research (McMullen et al., 2021; Refai et al., 2024b; Villares-Varela et al., 2022).

In social sciences, two preponderant theoretical perspectives have been commonly utilised to address the structure and agency debate: Structuration theory and critical realism. Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) has been the most used to explore the connection between structural conditions and the capacity of individuals to act. However, it does not allow for a dynamic understanding of how individuals navigate constraints in entrepreneurship. While strong structuration theory (Stones, 2005), which builds on Giddens' structuration, provides clearer guidelines for empirical analysis that render it more amenable to practical research settings, it still positions active agency as a property of the agent, and has been challenged by Kholeif and Jack (2019), who advance our understanding of this theory through a critical realist lens. Critical realism (Archer 1995, 2003; Bhaskar 2016) offers a more nuanced approach to the role of agency. By positioning agency within a critical realist paradigm, Kholeif and Jack (2019) incorporate both duality and dualism to stress the role of agency in achieving structural changes. Nevertheless, critical realism has been marginally explored in entrepreneurship studies; attempts to incorporate a systematic study of structure and agency in entrepreneurial contexts have not been sufficiently developed (Kholeif and Jack, 2019; Elkafrawi et al., 2022).

In this editorial, we address calls for critical research on entrepreneurial agency and view this agency as being itself contextualised. Agency becomes the manifestation of duality through intertwined interactions between agents and their structures, which simultaneously constrain and enable this agency; it cannot be detached from the agent, nor from the contexts in which these agents operate (Morris, 2020; Villares-Varela et al., 2022). Elkafrawi et al. (2022) advance this notion by highlighting the significance of specific contextual resources and internal and external structures to reconceptualise agency as ‘a critical aspect that underlies duality in entrepreneurship through its recursive interplay between contexts as environments (out there) and contexts as constructed (through entrepreneurs)’, thereby indicating the relevance of agency to understanding how agents deploy resources and shape their entrepreneurial journeys (p.16).

This view on entrepreneurial agency is further developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) who stress the role of temporality in agency, whereby past, present and future orientations all come into play through elements of ‘iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation’, thus, adding clarity to entrepreneurial agency as ‘the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; McMullen et al., 2021: 1219).

With this overall understanding of entrepreneurial agency, emphasising dynamic interplays between agency and structure over time, we propose three complementary perspectives on constrained entrepreneurial agency. These perspectives are not meant to be conclusive nor mutually exclusive, but valuable in terms of understanding the contextual specificities that contribute to the contextualised nature of agency within constrained contexts. The first perspective focuses on the contexts as relatively more or less constrained for entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. The second focuses on constraints related to the positions of individual or groups of entrepreneurs within a context, while the third emphasises the individual interpretation and enactment of context for entrepreneurship. Each of these emphasise different aspects and sources of constraints related to entrepreneurial agency, thus opening different but complementary avenues of research, insights and normative prescriptions.

Agency in constrained contexts

A predominant approach to constrained entrepreneurial agency considers constraints as emergent from various relative scarcities or deficiencies in the external structures of the context in which the entrepreneur is situated. This approach has underlined much research related to, for example, rural and peripheral entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2021), entrepreneurship in institutional voids or crisis (Fathallah et al., 2024), poverty entrepreneurship and refugee-camp entrepreneurship (de la Chaux and Haugh, 2020; Harima and Plak, 2025). In rural entrepreneurship research, the socio-spatial context of rural or peripheral localities is considered scarce in the resources traditionally associated with successful entrepreneurship, and other deficiencies in markets, infrastructure and institutional support relative to urban contexts (Korsgaard et al., 2021). The constraints thus, emerge externally from the structural conditions in which the entrepreneurial agency is embedded (Elkafrawi et al., 2022). In response, a central focal point of entrepreneurial agency becomes mobilization and creative reinterpretation of resources in the process of developing new entrepreneurial ventures and projects. Examples abound in current research of how entrepreneurs engage in various forms of bricolage and exaptation of resources essentially overcoming initial resource constraints by creatively mobilising and repurposing resources (Gaddefors et al., 2020; Branzei and Fathallah, 2023). For example, bricolage as survival through patch-working strategies of migrant

entrepreneurs living in precarity becomes a form of social agency that cushions against financial vulnerability and support business growth (Villares-Varela et al., 2018).

Of particular interest to this perspective on agency though is how seemingly invaluable and obsolete resources from within rural or peripheral landscapes, histories, heritages and infrastructures are re-enacted through what Berglund et al. (2016) refer to as entrepreneurial provocations or epistemological displacements (see also Gaddefors et al., 2020). This line of thinking draws heavily on the fundamental Penrosian insight that resources have potentially infinite possible uses that can be unleashed through entrepreneurial agency (Penrose, 1995). Closely connected to this line of research, is the emphasis on embeddedness of entrepreneurs as a source of resource mobilisation, highlighting how entrepreneurs can access resources through local networks and communities, and how these networks and communities in themselves can become resources, or even collective entrepreneurial agents (Fathallah et al., 2024). Collective agency, therefore, becomes more pronounced around mutual dispositions that drive entrepreneurship through a sustainable ripple of actions, to minimise the challenges around limited resources (Refai et al., 2024b).

In this perspective of constrained entrepreneurial agency, seemingly given and deficient resource contexts and environments are overcome through imaginative resourcing and resourcefulness, oftentimes expanding entrepreneurial agency beyond the individual entrepreneur to entrepreneurial communities and collectives. This perspective can be noted in the Itani et al. (2025) article in this special issue. The authors show how entrepreneurial agency is mobilised to reshape the lives of entrepreneurs and others by focusing on the resilience of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon's poly-crisis context, within extreme and multiple external structural limitations. They unravel the interactions between vulnerability and resilience (Branzei and Fathallah, 2023) through what they term as women's resilience fatigue and rebellion against resilience. Here, women entrepreneurs do not reject resilience, but rather its negative numbing effect, thereby shifting their ambitions beyond passive endurance towards proactive and rebellious forms of resilience that drive growth and success despite challenges. Entrepreneurial rebellion consequently emerges as a coping mechanism and an agentic reaction that could transition from an individual effort to a collective action that impacts the overall community resilience amid poly-crisis.

Constrained positions in context

A second and increasingly advanced perspective conceptualises constrained entrepreneurial agency as related to positions within contexts. Here constraints on entrepreneurial agency are imposed or defined through an individual entrepreneur or groups of entrepreneurs in terms of their position in societal structures, discourses and/or institutions. Aligned with the fundamental insights of feminist positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990), positions within societal structures shape the experiences and agentic opportunity structures of individuals so that marginalised, stigmatised or otherwise oppressed groups and individuals be they women, immigrants, refugees, LGBT+, disabled individuals or lower social classes, etc., are denied access to resources and opportunities that the majority or uppity groups have (Jones et al., 2025).

Brändle and Kuckertz (2023) explore these structural transformations through a social inequality lens, whereby inequalities imposed by various constraints can drive individuals to break free from stigmatising constraints (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013) by actively seeking a place in new environments through entrepreneurship. Here, entrepreneurial agency becomes the manifestation of emancipatory entrepreneurship from constraints (Jennings et al., 2016; Laine and Kibler, 2022; Rindova et al., 2009; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021), whereby entrepreneurs 'seek to disrupt the status quo and change their position in the social order in which they are embedded – and on occasion, the social order itself' (Rindova et al., 2009: 478). Uncovering the role of individual

differences also becomes highly relevant to understanding this perspective on entrepreneurial agency. Brändle and Kuckertz (2023) call for expanding our approaches to exploring entrepreneurial agency through focusing on an agent's social class origins in particular as a way to extend dualistic assumptions. They show how social class origins shape past and present cognitive thoughts of agents in ways that could hinder their entrepreneurial agency and hamper their social mobility.

Our argument on *constrained positions in context* is also relevant to migrant/ minority entrepreneurship research, which has often employed a mixed embeddedness (ME) lens (Jones et al., 2019; Kloosterman, 2010). ME focuses on exploring the role of structure and networks of migrant entrepreneurs to indicate spaces available within markets, where migrant entrepreneurs can act, rather than considering what those migrant entrepreneurs want to do. Extant research has highlighted how this approach does not sufficiently pay attention to the role of agency (Ram et al., 2017). To overcome this gap, Villares-Varela et al. (2022) combine this lens with Sen's (1985, 1989) capabilities approach to explore the interplay between a migrant entrepreneur's agency and structural factors. In line with Carter et al. (2015) and Villares-Varela et al. (2022) stress the significant amount of minority entrepreneurs with the capacity and scope to negotiate, modify and achieve change in ways that exceed what can be anticipated by ME. In a similar vein, ME stresses the importance of recognising the social location of entrepreneurs, which can help in defining *constrained positions in context*. A social location can be experienced and translated variably depending on how agency is prompted and affects not only an entrepreneur's ability to understand and access institutions but also the range of entrepreneurial outcomes they could produce (Villares-Varela et al., 2018, 2022). This location stresses the multiple intersections that entrepreneurs experience (Ram et al., 2017). These intersections can be similarly intertwined between internal and external structures in ways that enable or hinder agency (Elkafrawi et al., 2022) as in, for example, gender (Meliou and Edwards, 2017), motherhood (Duberley and Carrigan, 2013); emancipation (Roos and Gaddefors, 2022), discrimination (Crawley et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2014), ethnicities, disabilities (Ram et al., 2017), informality, legitimacy (Refai and McElwee, 2023) and other contextual specificities.

The article by Wainwright and Muñoz (2025) informs this perspective on agency by focusing on ex-prisoners who can struggle to establish a stable post-prison life amid stigmatised social locations, alongside psychological scars of incarceration, diminished self-esteem and lack of trust in others. Nevertheless, their agency manifests through a paradoxical reconstruction of 'prison-like' conditions, where the latter – while restrictive – can support focus and routine. Consequently, by replicating some elements of this restricted structure, a safe reconfiguration of identity is enabled, facilitating resource accumulation and transition to entrepreneurial endeavours, with often little or no social support.

Chitac et al. (2025) in this special issue also advances research within this perspective, showing how Ukrainian women refugees overwrite their refugee stigma and some of its associated socio-economic constraints in ways that boost their self-confidence and feelings of worthiness. By utilising Rowland (1997), they show that despite the vulnerability of refugee women entrepreneurial identities, those identities become a trusted vehicle to enact *power from within* (by reclaiming some of their pre-war entrepreneurial competences), *power over* (by restoring their pre-war entrepreneurial identity to overcome refugee stigma and socio-economic constraints) and *power to* (by shifting from hopeless victims to providers for their families).

Appiah et al. (2025) in this special issue further contributes to this perspective on constrained positions in context. They employ De Certeau (1984) to show how marginalised female entrepreneurs in Ghana, denied resources and opportunities by the system as structured and defined by what Appiah et al. refer to as The Strong, deploy tactics that allow them to carve out niches and spaces for informal entrepreneurship. While the tactics of The Weak deployed by the

female entrepreneurs do not involve a fundamental restructuring of the context, they allow for the generation of income and subsistence in liminal spaces and smaller everyday acts of entrepreneurial resistance.

Interpretations and enactments of constraints in contexts

A third complementary perspective focuses on the individual or collective interpretation and enactments of resource and opportunity spaces for entrepreneurial agency. This perspective emphasises the social and subjective constructions of contexts through meanings, discourses and cognitions, creating representations that shape how individuals and groups experience their resource and opportunity spaces (Welter et al., 2019). Here constraints reside not so much in *objective*, prior or given contexts, but the internal envisioning or lack thereof of avenues for entrepreneurial agency to create new value, change life courses or overcome experienced structural oppression. This perspective is demonstrated when skilled or professional refugee entrepreneurs act with conviction to fulfil idiosyncratic integration goals based on values and meanings that go beyond limited financial successes to inspire other fellow refugees and raise awareness around community contributions and active citizenship of refugees (Refai et al., 2024a). In this perspective, entrepreneurial agency requires agents to envision beyond limitations (Refai and McElwee, 2023), and believe in overcoming constraints and the creation of a possible world through entrepreneurship (Dey and Mason, 2018). This perspective can accommodate the mutual, yet sometimes contradicting, identities around different meanings and values, and how these are enacted through agency to achieve positive outcomes for individual entrepreneurs, local communities and broader societies (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2019).

In this line of research, McMullen et al. (2021) propose institutional immunisation against the effects of institutionalisation as an important aspect to achieve structural transformation, but only when combined with ability, motivation, opportunity and process skill, while being underpinned by attitudes, dispositions or strategies of an entrepreneur. Through reflexive awareness of institutional conditions (Seo and Creed, 2002), immunisation allows escaping the institutional constraint frames that significantly limit or even inhibit the individual's ability to imagining other possibilities (McMullen et al., 2021). Relatedly, Refai and McElwee (2023) combine mixed embeddedness with Weber's Iron Cage of Rationality to envisage how entrepreneurs oversee the limitations of their cage. They account for the implicit skills and charismatic abilities of entrepreneurs to conceptualise a liquid cage, whereby refugee entrepreneurs create spaces of contextual fluidity that enable them to escape institutional constraints and gain upward social mobility.

The article by Kelly and McAdam (2025) in this special issue contributes to discussions on this perspective. Underpinned by post-feminism and crisis sensemaking literature, the authors conceptualise how women's experiences discursively constitute the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship in a pandemic crisis. In light of systemic disparities that continue to persist in work contexts, this constitution becomes necessary to understand how digital entrepreneurs navigate the conditions of austerity and crisis germane to the pandemic, consequently encouraging more women into careers in digital entrepreneurship. Here, elements of post-feminism are mobilised to cope with the false promise of gender egalitarianism and inform the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship.

These three perspectives of constrained entrepreneurial agency draw up important conceptual, empirical and methodological issues all emphasising the contextualised nature of entrepreneurial agency. They highlight the significance of time, place and conditions, as well as the various social, political and economic contexts in which entrepreneurs act. They further draw attention towards the need for multi-level analysis in entrepreneurship research in ways that accommodate the

individual differences, needs, contributions and approaches of multiple stakeholders, to pull together a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurial agency.

Articles presented in this special issue

The call-for-research for this special issue attracted 26 submissions from 74 authors in 22 countries. Five articles have been accepted for this special issue, from 19 authors in six countries. All submissions were independently assessed by the editorial team. Papers that passed the desk review underwent at least two rounds of anonymous reviews by two to three expert reviewers, whose time, expertise and constructive comments made this special issue possible.

The five accepted articles seek to advance our understanding of entrepreneurial agency beyond common understandings. They present a range of explorations within various constrained contexts, including former prisoner entrepreneurs – post release in England, women entrepreneurs in digital spaces during the pandemic, Ukrainian women refugee entrepreneurs displaced in the United Kingdom and Romania, marginalised informal women entrepreneurs in Ghana, and women entrepreneurs in Lebanon's poly-crisis context – following the Beirut 2020 blast. Each article is briefly introduced next, alongside its main findings, and how it contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial agency, with particular regard to constrained contexts, the focus of this special issue.

The first article by Lee Wainwright and Pablo Munoz 'Enabling Agency in Constrained Contexts: How Restorative Entrepreneurship Supports Reintegration PostIncarceration' reveals how entrepreneurs with incarceration backgrounds harness their sense of agency by paradoxically reconstructing 'prison-like' conditions to facilitate resource accumulation and the safe reconfiguration of identity. The approach followed in this article highlights the complexities and interplay between constraints, autonomy and stigma, culminating in a nuanced perspective on restorative entrepreneurship. The employment of a process-tracing methodology in this article has enabled rich consideration of the temporal context of entrepreneurs, showing how at-risk individuals transform previously debilitating conditions into familiar psychological and structural frameworks that allow for incremental progress and calculated risk-taking. Consequently, the article uncovers how constraint re-enactment and the reconstruction of previous constraints offer ex-prisoner entrepreneurs a safe place to foster agency and drive transformative outcomes.

The second article by Grainne Kelly and Maura McAdam looks at 'Disaggregating Women's Agency in Digital Spaces in the Constrained Pandemic Context: A Postfeminist Sensemaking Perspective'. By synthesizing crisis sensemaking and postfeminism, this article explores how concepts of choice, agency and empowerment appear in women's digital entrepreneurship within the context of the pandemic's complex gender discourses. It highlights the rising number of women digital entrepreneurs and their continued under-representation. Methodologically, it employs feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis, aligning with calls for postqualitative inquiry in entrepreneurship.

The third article by Iuliana Chitac, Elisabeth Michielsens and Miruna Radu-Lefebvre, explores 'The Liability of Refugeeess: Leveraging Multiple Identities to Enact Power in a Context of Displacement'. This article introduces the concept of liability of refugeeess, which shows how Ukrainian women refugee entrepreneurs transform their vulnerabilities into strategic power. The phenomenological approach employed in this article shows how those women negotiate, do and undo their intersectional identities in the United Kingdom and Romania, challenging conventions that portray women refugees as passive victims or invisible in masculinised nationhood. Building on Rowland (1997), the authors show how power from within, power over and power to are utilised to employ vulnerable refugee identities as a trusted vehicle to enact entrepreneurial agency. This study reframes the refugee entrepreneur's agency within a liquid cage (Refai and McElwee,

2023), where intersectional constraints and power come together, allowing for transformative contributions to both their host and home countries.

The fourth article by Gloria Appiah, Nadia Zahoor and Manjusha Hirekhan ‘The Weaker Vessel. Survival Tactics of Women Entrepreneurs in Ghana’s Informal Economy’ focuses on the everyday tactics of informal female entrepreneurs in Ghana. Facing challenging limitations enacted by what the authors refer to as The Strong, drawing on the work of De Certeau (1984), the female entrepreneurs studied deploy various tactics to establish informal businesses to advance their livelihoods. The study identifies tactics of resistance and alternatives. Tactics of resistance involve resistance to restrictive structures by, for example, avoiding, defying or circumventing regulations. Tactics of alternatives, creatively establish workarounds to constraints using informal support systems. These tactics enable female entrepreneurs to carve out informal pockets of resistance and secure livelihoods and value for themselves and local communities.

The fifth article by Mona Itani, Rayan Fawaz, Dima Jamali, Shintaro Okazaki and Ramzi Fathallah ‘Rebellion Against Resilience? The Experience of Women Entrepreneurs in the Context of Poly-crisis’ focuses on women entrepreneurs in the extreme context of Lebanon, in the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut blast. The article establishes how these entrepreneurs exhibit a sense of agency and resilience to overcome extreme conditions in challenging poly-crisis contexts. The article contributes to research on agency in extreme contexts by showing that focusing on one’s own resilience is not sufficient for persistence in poly-crisis contexts. Rather, the article indicates how resilience fatigue mobilises entrepreneurial agency through rebellion against resilience, which helps in overcoming the numbing effects of resilience. Consequently, entrepreneurial resilience transitions from an individual effort to a collective action that reshapes the situation for the entrepreneur as well as others in their community. In focusing on a poly-crisis context, where long-term resilience is required in order to face entangled crises, agency helps the entrepreneurs in the study to rebel against the status quo and find a way to alter how they do business and challenge existing systems and structures.

Conclusions and looking forward

By stressing the essential paradox of embedded agency, this editorial contributes to contextualisation in entrepreneurial agency research. Historically, contextualisation in entrepreneurship research has tended to focus on how entrepreneurial actions are shaped by macro-level structures, while often placing agency as an element tied to the agent. This editorial however re-emphasises the meaning of contexts being produced, co-produced and/or re-produced through structure–agent interaction, comprising recursive internal and external structures (Morales et al., 2019), a meaning that we bring to the forefront of our discussions. It is only through this recursive interplay that structural transformations happen through individual actions that modify, challenge or preserve structures over time (Elkafrawi et al., 2022). Through this emphasis, we denote the particular contextual specificities that can similarly promote or hinder entrepreneurial agency, focusing in particular on the specificities of constrained contexts.

We argue that these specificities of constrained contexts filter entrepreneurial agency in different ways, which we capture through three complementary perspectives on constrained entrepreneurial agency including *agency in constrained contexts*, *constrained positions in context* and *interpretations and enactments of constraints in contexts*. These three perspectives contribute to our understanding of how contexts filter entrepreneurial agency and enable action, recognising that agency becomes mediated within recursive interplays between ‘contexts as environments (out there) and contexts as constructed (through entrepreneurs)’ (Elkafrawi et al., 2022: 16). To add clarity, our three perspectives denote how constraints can be conceptualised around external

structural constraints in which entrepreneurial agency is embedded, positions of individual or groups of entrepreneurs within contexts that are imposed or defined in societal structures, discourses and/or institutions, or individual interpretations and enactments of contexts for entrepreneurship based on meanings, discourses and cognitions that shape experiences, respectively. Consequently, while agent knowledge, thoughts and actions involve reflections of their internalisation of previous and current external structures, which are necessary for the enactment of entrepreneurial agency, this enactment can only manifest through recursive interactions with existing external structures, which can similarly hinder or promote that agency (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023).

Therefore, the three perspectives on entrepreneurial agency proposed in this editorial stress a context-receptive account of entrepreneurial agency in constrained contexts, which should be understood within a broader recognition of different contextual specificities, rather than a focus on similar aspects of entrepreneurs (Lang et al., 2014). This will involve, for instance, acknowledging the skills, creativity and aspirations of groups residing at the bottom of the market/labour market, within precarious conditions (Bloch and McKay, 2015; Edwards et al., 2016; Villares-Varela et al., 2022), and how these can contribute towards social innovation and community and/or regional development (Korsgaard, 2020). Similarly, we call for better understanding of regional development beyond a narrow focus on specific types of organisationally and institutionally thick urban regions exemplified through clusters and physical proximity (Pahnke and Welter, 2019; Zahra et al., 2014) to a focus on the contributions of resource-scarce, organisationally thin, regions (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019). Our proposition also brings about the importance of acknowledging under-explored dimensions as, for example, temporality (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), history (van Merriënboer et al., 2023), individual differences (Brändle and Kuckertz, 2023), value perceptions (Refai et al., 2024a, 2024b) and contingent and contextual meanings (Elkafrawi et al., 2022; Korsgaard et al., 2015), which all influence the way and degree to which entrepreneurs are able to enact agency in the face of constraints.

While we note and stress the entrepreneurial agency of agents in constrained contexts, we similarly call for researching entrepreneurial agency in ways that overcome the pitfalls of agent-centric or structure-centric perspectives in entrepreneurship research (Pahnke and Welter, 2019). Importantly, the debates presented herein lead us to highlight the role of this editorial and the special issue it introduces in calling for more critical and constructive explorations in entrepreneurship research that acknowledge the internal and external, existing and emerging, past and present and explicit and implicit structures that continue to shape and influence the ways and extent to which entrepreneurial agency is filtered. A balanced approach that avoids dichotomies is needed. On the one hand, entrepreneurship research must, rightly so, celebrate the successes of entrepreneurs in constrained contexts and understand how they navigate and overcome structural constraints (Alvarez and Barney, 2014; Bruton et al., 2008; Kimmitt et al., 2020), and how their propensities and experiences can enable entrepreneurial agency and structural transformations within disadvantaged circumstances. On the other hand, we warn against positioning entrepreneurship as the ultimate panacea to economic difficulties (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Refai et al., 2024a; Smith et al., 2019) and call against the risks of an epistemological fallacy in entrepreneurship research that focuses on micro-level activities when outcomes are mostly determined by macro-level dynamics of socio-economic structures and policies (Korsgaard et al., 2025). This is of crucial importance since studies on policy development targeting entrepreneurs in constrained contexts illuminate how planned interventions aim at 'fixing' the perceived limitations of individual business owners, focusing on the agentic properties of individuals, rather than challenging structural barriers (see Ram et al., 2017; Rath and Swagerman, 2016).

At policy and practice levels, the criticality we call for herein is essential to explore the broader role of entrepreneurship under a more encompassing umbrella. It serves to enable better allocation of resources and investments in entrepreneurship, while avoiding the danger of promoting structural inequalities rather than inclusivity, driving growth at the expense of novelty and authenticity, encouraging informal or illicit entrepreneurial practices over formal and legal ones, legitimising de-investments in constrained contexts to promote urban investments and growth, and other detriments that require further exploration. A broader encapsulation of the role of entrepreneurs in constrained contexts advances our understanding of the beauty of entrepreneurship, and our acknowledgement of the agency of entrepreneurs who continue to offer unlimited value to a wide range of audiences, despite the challenges. It further brings to light the significant, yet potentially under-utilised, socio-economic contributions of many under-represented entrepreneurs within constrained contexts, and offers advice on prospective ways to support their development, integration and contributions through policies that support harnessing of a wider range of value offerings.

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